

**Germany's Alt-Right
by Timothy Garton Ash**

The New York Review of Books®

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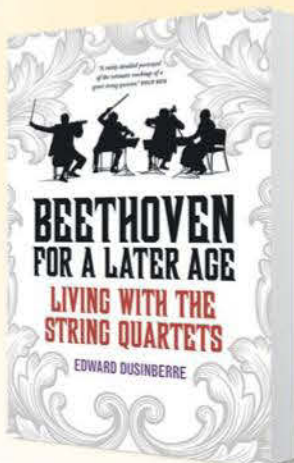
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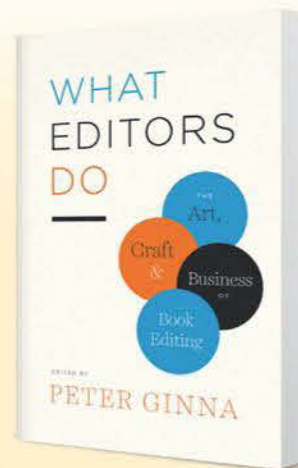
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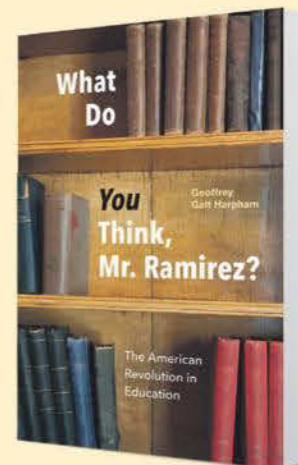
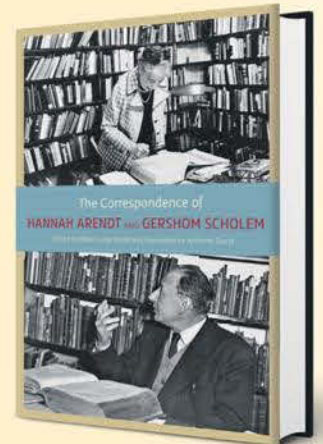
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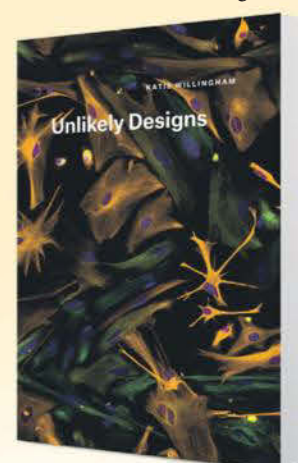
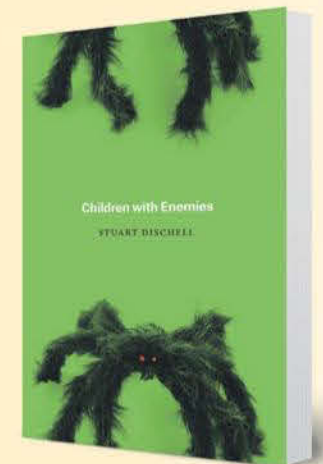
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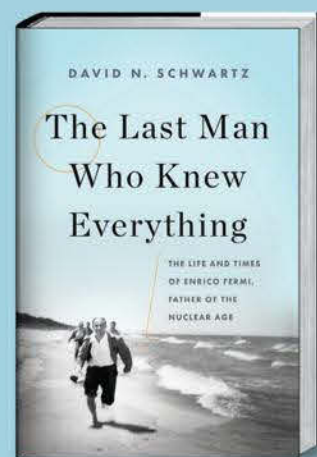
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It's the Kultur, Stupid

**Angst für Deutschland:
Die Wahrheit über die AfD:
wo sie herkommt, wer sie führt,
wohin sie steuert**
[Angst for Germany:
The Truth about the AfD:
Where It Comes from, Who Leads
It, Where It Is Headed]
by Melanie Amann.
Munich: Droemer, 317 pp.,
€16.99 (paper)

**Finis Germania
[The End of Germany]**
by Rolf Peter Sieferle.
Steigra: Antaios, 104 pp., €8.50

Timothy Garton Ash

"The reason we are inundated by culturally alien [*kulturfremden*] peoples such as Arabs, Sinti and Roma etc. is the systematic destruction of civil society as a possible counterweight to the enemies-of-the-constitution by whom we are ruled. These pigs are nothing other than puppets of the victor powers of the Second World War..." Thus begins a 2013 personal e-mail from Alice Weidel, who in this autumn's pivotal German election was one of two designated "leading candidates" of the Alternative für Deutschland (hereafter AfD or the Alternative). The chief "pig" and "puppet" was, of course, Angela Merkel. Despite the publication of this leaked e-mail two weeks before election day, adding to other widely publicized evidence of AfD leaders' xenophobic, right-wing nationalist views, one in eight German voters gave the Alternative their support. It is now the second-largest opposition party in the Bundestag, with ninety-two MPs.

Xenophobic right-wing nationalism—in Germany of all places? The very fact that observers express surprise indicates how much Germany has changed since 1945. These days, we expect more of Germany than of ourselves. For, seen from one point of view, this is just Germany partaking in the populist normality of our time, as manifested in the Brexit vote in Britain, Marine le Pen's Front National in France, Geert Wilders's blond beastliness in the Netherlands, the right-wing nationalist-populist government in Poland, and Trumpery in the US.

Like all contemporary populisms, the German version exhibits both generic and specific features. In common with other populisms, it denounces the current elites (*Alteliten* in AfD-speak) and established parties (*Altparteien*) while speaking in the name of the *Volk*, a word that, with its double meaning of people and ethno-culturally defined nation, actually best captures what Trump and Le Pen mean when they say "the people." In *Angst für Deutschland*, her vividly reported book about the party, Melanie Amann, a journalist at the weekly news magazine *Der Spiegel*, notes how some of its activists have appropriated the slogan of the East German protests against Communist rule in 1989: *Wir sind das Volk*—We are the people. Like other populists, Germany's attack the mainstream media (*Lügenpresse*, the "lying press") while making effective use of social media. On the eve of the elec-

tion, the Alternative had some 362,000 Facebook followers, compared with the Social Democrats' 169,000 and just 154,000 for Merkel's Christian Democratic Union (CDU).

Its criticism of globalization is familiar, as is its angry and self-congratulatory denunciation of political correctness. Typical of all European populisms is a negative attitude toward the EU in general and the euro in particular. The Alternative started life in 2013 as an anti-euro party. Although overall German support for the EU

last year's Islamist terror attack on a Christmas market in Berlin, in which twelve were killed, one AfD leader tweeted: "these are Merkel's dead."

Besides the refugee influx, there are other features peculiar to German populism. For eight of the last twelve years, Germany has been governed by a so-called Grand Coalition of Christian Democrats—Merkel's CDU in a loveless parliamentary marriage with the more conservative Bavarian Christian Social Union (CSU)—and Social Democrats. This has impelled disgruntled voters toward the smaller parties and the extremes. The effect has been reinforced by Merkel's woolly centrist

attention, not paid due respect. When a street protest in a small town in Saxony was totally ignored by the visiting Chancellor Merkel, a protester complained, "She doesn't look at us even with her ass!" One can imagine a Trump voter saying something similar about Hillary Clinton. In explaining the populist vote in many countries, the inequality of attention is at least as important as economic inequality.

And then, to add insult to injury, these bloody foreigners—Muslims to boot!—are welcomed in Germany with open arms and "get everything for nothing." As in other European welfare states, the knowledge that "everything" includes generous welfare provisions only sharpens the resentment.

Unlike in Britain and America, economic factors play only a small part here. It's not just that Germany as a whole is doing well economically. In a 2016 poll, four out of five AfD voters described their personal economic situation as "good" or "very good." This is not a party of the economically "left behind." It gathers the discontented from every walk of life, but those who predominate in its ranks are educated, middle-class men. A leading CDU politician told me that the angry protest letters he gets from defectors to the Alternative will typically be from a doctor, businessman, lawyer, or professor. This strong presence of the educated upper middle class distinguishes German populism from many other populisms.

Among the leaders of the party, they are visibly represented by its other designated "leading candidate," Alexander Gauland, a seventy-six-year-old former CDU functionary who almost invariably wears a check-patterned tweedy jacket and dark green tie. He is one of those elderly conservative gents who look so English that you know they must be German. Then there is Beatrix von Storch, a shrill and tiresome minor aristocrat with neoliberal, Hayekian intellectual pretensions. (Her maternal grandfather was Hitler's finance minister—but we are not responsible for our grandfathers.) As for Alice Weidel: this former Goldman Sachs and Allianz asset manager, white, blonde, always neatly turned out in business attire, lives just across the border in Switzerland, in a same-sex relationship with a Swiss filmmaker of Sinhalese heritage and two adopted sons. These are not the German equivalent of the American rust belt manual worker, or of what is known in England, with liberal condescension, as "white van man." (The van is white as well as the man.)

"It's the economy, stupid" simply does not apply to Germany's populist voters. Rather, it's the *Kultur*. (I say *Kultur*, rather than simply culture, because the German word implies both culture and ethno-cultural identity, and has traditionally been counterposed to liberal, cosmopolitan *Zivilisation*.) In a poll shown on German television on election night, 95 percent of AfD voters said they were very worried that "we are experiencing a loss of German culture and language," 94 percent that "our life in Germany will change too much," and 92 percent that "the influence of Islam in Germany will become too strong." Feeding this politics of cultural despair—to recall a famous phrase of the historian Fritz Stern—is a milieu of writers, media, and books whose arguments and vocabulary



Alexander Gauland, a leader of the Alternative für Deutschland; illustration by Wilfried Kahrs from qpress.de, a German left-wing satirical blog run by Kahrs

is still very strong, a poll conducted for the Bertelsmann foundation in the summer of 2017 found that 50 percent of those respondents who identified themselves as on the "right" (carefully distinguished from the "center-right") would vote for Germany to leave the EU, if Germans were offered a Brexit-style in-or-out referendum. This is a remarkable finding. Unlike Brexit, Germexit would be the end of the European Union.

Tiresomely familiar to any observer of Trump, Brexit, or Wilders is the demagogic appeal to emotions while playing fast and loose with facts. In Amann's account, the predominant emotion here is *Angst*. Her book cover picks out the AfD's initials in her title, *Angst für Deutschland*. She quotes the *Angstindex* of an insurance company reporting in mid-2016 that "never before have 'fears grown so drastically within one year'"—the leading fears now being terrorist attacks, political extremism, and "tensions resulting from the arrival of foreigners."

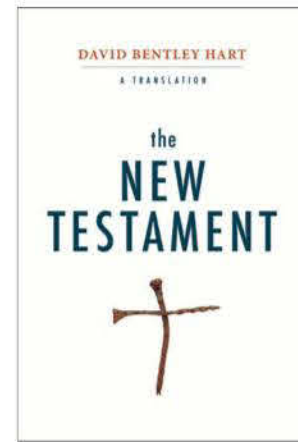
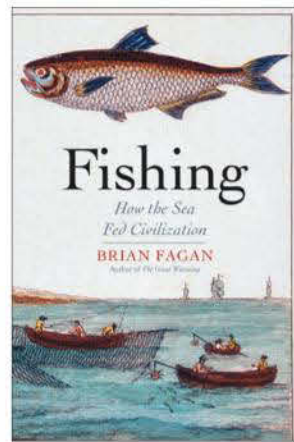
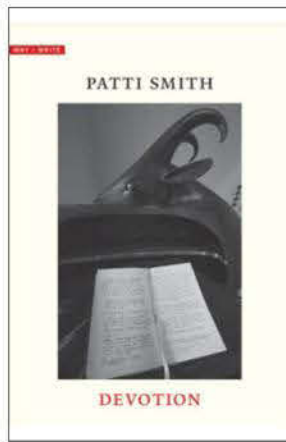
The dramatic influx of nearly 1.2 million refugees in 2015–2016 is the single most direct cause of the Alternative's electoral success. Its leaders denounce Merkel for opening Germany's frontiers in September 2015 to the massed refugees then being made thoroughly unwelcome in Viktor Orbán's xenophobic populist Hungary. Following

version of Margaret Thatcher's TINA (There Is No Alternative), perfectly captured in the German word *alternativlos* (without alternatives). It's no accident that this protest party is called the Alternative.

The Alternative scores best in what we still loosely call East Germany, that is, the territory of the former German Democratic Republic. There is a striking inverse correlation between the number of immigrants (or people of migrant origin) in an area and the populist vote: East Germany has the fewest immigrants and the most AfD voters. As one participant in a demonstration organized by the far right, xenophobic movement Pegida (the initials stand for Patriotic Europeans Against the Islamization of the West) told a reporter: "In Saxony today there are hardly any immigrants, but there is a danger of the Islamization of Germany in fifty or a hundred years." An urgent matter, then.

It would require a longer essay to explore the collective psychology of this East German vote, but its ingredients certainly include the poisonous legacy of a society behind the Berlin Wall that was anything but open and multicultural. There is also a resentful feeling among East Germans that they have been treated as second-class citizens in united Germany: not given enough

Wilfried Kahrs/qpress.de



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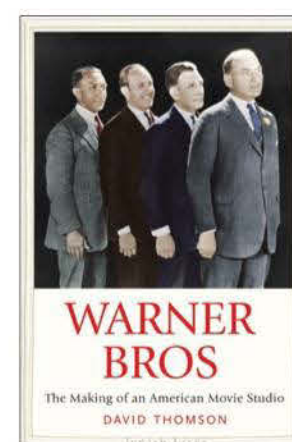
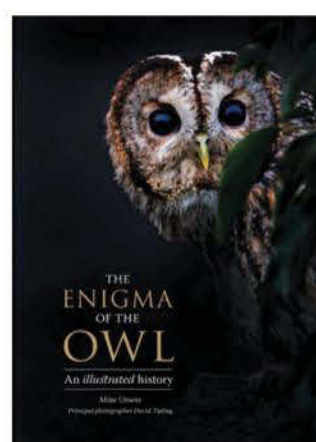
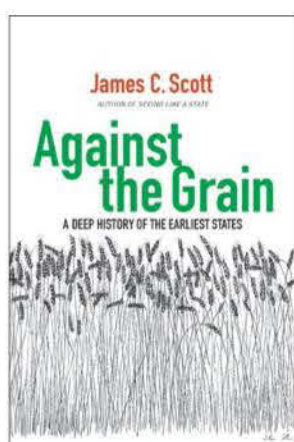
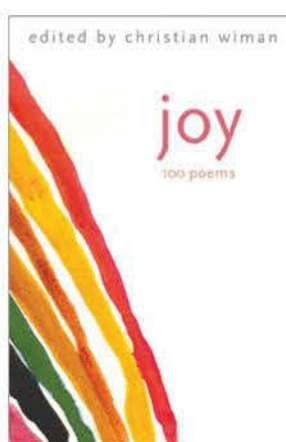
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connect back to themes of an earlier German right-wing culture in the first half of the twentieth century. This is a new German right with distinct echoes of the old.

Amann shows how a publisher and ideological activist of the new right, Götz Kubitschek, played a significant behind-the-scenes part in the development of the party. She quotes a blog post from the very first weeks of the then primarily anti-euro party's existence, in which Kubitschek describes hostility to the euro as "the door-opener theme" after which "our themes (identity, resistance, gender-, party- and ideology-criticism) will come rumbling through, so long as we quickly and consistently put our foot in the door." And so it came to pass—thanks to the refugee crisis. Kubitschek was instrumental in promoting the party career of an East German history teacher called Björn Höcke, whose plangent rhetoric of cultural pessimism and *völkisch* nationalism would have been entirely at home in the 1920s—except that now the scapegoats are Muslims rather than Jews. Höcke told a gathering of the Alternative's youth wing that, because of Germany's low birthrate and mass immigration, "for the first time in a thousand years the question is posed of *Finis Germaniae* [the end of Germany]."

Interestingly, Amann begins the party's story not with the euro or the refugee crisis, but with a magazine interview given in 2009 by Thilo Sarrazin, then a director of the Bundesbank, and his subsequent book, *Germany Abolishes Itself*. As I noted in these pages at the time, bien pensant Ger-

man opinion leaders first ignored and then deplored his sub-Spenglerian tract about the forthcoming Islamic swamping of Germany—but it sold 1.2 million copies in less than nine months.¹ In his cellar, Sarrazin keeps folders stuffed with thousands of letters of support: "I would like to express my unconditional respect for your unvarnished remarks about the Turks." "When shall we at last kick out those who neither speak German nor want to, but only hold out their hands?" And "it's terrible that one can no longer tell the truth in Germany!"

Seven years later, in the run-up to this fall's election, controversy erupted around another angry and angst-ridden book. Like the Sarrazin affair, this latest storm is interesting not just for the ideas expressed by the author, but also for how democratic Germany responds to hateful echoes of its pre-1945 past.

A strange thing happened on the afternoon of July 20, 2017, the seventy-third anniversary of the German resistance's attempt to assassinate Adolf Hitler. If you looked up the *Spiegel* nonfiction best-seller list on Amazon there was a hole in sixth place, between *Alexander von Humboldt and the Invention of Nature* in fifth place and *Penguin Bloom: The Little Bird That Saved Our Family* at number seven. Subsequently, *Penguin Bloom* was silently lifted up to sixth place, number eight became number seven, and so on. The previous

¹See my "Germans, More or Less," *The New York Review*, February 24, 2011.

number-six best seller, a book called *Finis Germania* by Rolf Peter Sieferle, had simply disappeared.

What was going on? Had there been an embarrassing mistake in tabulating the bookshop sales that form the basis of the *Spiegel* best-seller list? Not at all. *Finis Germania* (a weirdly ungrammatical version of *Finis Germaniae*) was selling away. But the top editors of *Der Spiegel* had decided that such a nasty piece of work should not appear on their list. They were embarrassed that it had shot to prominence because one of their own journalists, Johannes Saltzwedel, had earlier placed it on a widely noticed list of recommended books carried by North German Radio and the *Süddeutsche Zeitung*, Germany's leading liberal daily. The controversy around that list seemed to have led people to buy *Finis Germania* in larger numbers.

Sieferle's book was, explained *Spiegel* deputy editor Susanne Beyer, "right-wing extremist, anti-Semitic, and historically revisionist," and since the news magazine sees itself as a "medium of Enlightenment," and the best-seller listing might be mistaken for a recommendation, they had removed it. So *Finis Germania* was consigned to an Orwellian memory hole, made an unbook. It was not a best seller. It had never been a best seller. *Weil nicht sein kann, was nicht sein darf*—for what may not be, cannot be—as the poet Christian Morgenstern once put it.

Predictably, the effect was the opposite of that intended. There was another storm of controversy around this bizarre decision, and even more people bought the book. The publisher was laughing all the way to the bank—and to this autumn's Frankfurt book fair, where he invited the AfD pocket-Spengler Björn Höcke to speak at the Antaios publishing house stand, thus generating another round of indignation, protest, and even more publicity. The publisher was none other than that new-right string-puller Götz Kubitschek, who, from his base in a village in the East German state of Saxony-Anhalt, had played a significant part in the party's *völkisch* turn. To cap it all, the book has a postscript by a friend of Sieferle's that describes the refugee crisis of 2015 as "internationally long since planned, and...triggered by the German Chancellor in the manner of a putsch."

So the whole new-right packaging of Sieferle's text stinks to high heaven. But why is the postscript written by a friend rather than the author? Because in the autumn of 2016 Sieferle committed suicide, hanging himself in the attic of his Heidelberg villa. He never sent *Finis Germania* to a publisher. That was done by his wife and friends, who found it on his computer, along with another book-length text, now published as *Das Migrationsproblem: Über die Unvereinbarkeit von Sozialstaat und Masseneinwanderung* (The Migration Problem: On the Incompatibility of the Welfare State and Mass Immigration). They interpreted the fact that Sieferle had carefully tidied up the electronic files as meaning he intended these texts for publication. But who knows? Perhaps he did not know himself.

The story of Rolf Peter Sieferle is a sad one. Generationally a '68er, and briefly part of the 1968 student protest movement, he was a highly cultured loner and academic oddball,

with a fine, provocative turn of phrase. He made a modest reputation with a book called *Der unterirdische Wald* (*The Underground Forest*), published in 1982, which described the modern world's plundering of millennia of carbon deposits to make coal and oil. Its title rather brilliantly blended the then-new West German Green concerns and the age-old German cultural fascination with the forest, the *Wald*. In 1994 he produced *Epochenwechsel: Die Deutschen an der Schwelle zum 21. Jahrhundert* (Turn of the Epochs: The Germans on the Eve of the Twenty-First Century). This already anticipated some of the themes of *Finis Germania*, including a provocative critique of the way in which Germany's treatment of its Nazi past supposedly puts the subject beyond rational debate.

A year later came *Die Konservative Revolution* (The Conservative Revolution), an argument built around biographical sketches of five right-wing German thinkers of the first half of the twentieth century, including Oswald Spengler and Ernst Jünger. While Sieferle's work at this time was still written in an academic style (and contemporary German academic style is no laughing matter), one senses his aesthetic fascination with his subjects' stormy, sweeping, no-holds-barred manner of writing—one he would make his own in *Finis Germania* twenty years later.

All these books were published by respectable publishers, to mixed reviews. It is said that Sieferle was deeply hurt because *Epochenwechsel* was not received as the major work he believed it to be. Rather late in life he became a full professor, but he was rarely seen at conferences and never part of the academic mainstream. By 2015, his cultural pessimism seems to have deepened into a kind of existential despair, exacerbated by serious health problems—reportedly he was suffering from cancer and losing his sight.

After the controversy erupted this year, some of his friends retrospectively told a writer for the *Frankfurter Allgemeine Zeitung* (FAZ) that in the last years of his life Sieferle had become isolated and embittered. But his widow wrote an angry letter to the FAZ, rejecting this tendentially apologetic ("he was a sick man") explanation and insisting that already in the 1990s, in *Epochenwechsel*, he had taken a "national conservative position." It seems plausible that both biographical strands, the ideological and the personal, combined to give *Finis Germania* its bitter and biting tone.

This is the background against which we must read Sieferle's book, a mere one hundred small-format pages of loosely connected short essays. In sound, they echo Friedrich Nietzsche, and in fury, Ernst Jünger, who is the ostensible subject of one section. Several passages are beyond parody, like a Monty Python version of an early-twentieth-century cultural pessimist walking the streets of twenty-first-century Germany. There are "tragic" nations, he informs us, such as the Russians, Jews, and Germans, and "untragic" ones, above all the Anglo-Saxons. I must confess to laughing out loud at his lament about "the sensually perceptible presence of nihilistic relativity in every pedestrian

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zone." Nietzsche prowls amid the weekend shoppers of Heidelberg.

Then there are the sections about contemporary Germany's attitude toward its Nazi past, which account for most of the controversy. Here Sieferle takes to an extreme his argument in *Epochenwechsel* that Germany has frozen its Nazi past, and Auschwitz, into a kind of absolute negative myth, marked by ritualized, increasingly empty expressions of *Betroffenheit* (only weakly translatable as a sense of intense personal dismay), and thereby separated from everything else in contemporary German life. "National Socialism, more precisely Auschwitz, has become the last myth of a thoroughly rationalized world," he writes, in one of many deliberately provocative formulations. "A myth is a truth that is beyond discussion." This puts the Jews beyond criticism, and turns the German, or at least the "eternal Nazi," into "the secularized devil of an enlightened present." (AfD ideologues more crudely call this the *Schuldskult*, the guilt cult.)

Sieferle writes with a kind of wild determination to say exactly what he thinks, however publicly unacceptable (and remember, we don't definitely know that he intended this for publication). He argues that *Vergangenheitsbewältigung*—the familiar West German term for "overcoming" a difficult past—has become a kind of state religion, in which the Germans are forever the negative chosen people and the Jews the positive chosen people. "The first commandment reads: thou shalt have no other holocaust besides me." And again: "Adam Hitler is not transcended by any Jesus; and such a Jesus"—one involuntarily wonders: Does he mean himself?—"would surely be rapidly crucified. The guilt remains total, is compensated by no divine mercy." This is hysterical stuff.

Sieferle reaches far too often for Nietzsche-like profundity and usually misses the mark, tripping over his own rhetorical shoelaces into a puddle of absurdity. But occasionally, when he pulls together his life's work on modernity, ecology, and German history, a genuinely thought-provoking formulation emerges. Referring to the "project of the modern," he writes that "the history of the projects of the eighteenth and nineteenth century is, then, one of a total failure, which became apparent in the twentieth century: morally, from World War to Auschwitz, technologically and economically, in the environmental crisis of the end of the century." (Not, I think, the remark of an Auschwitz denier or routine anti-Semite.) And again: "The twentieth century can be seen as a period of vast profligacy...profligate with everything: with natural resources, but also with people, with ideas, with cultural reserves."

Finis Germania raises in helpfully sharp form the question of how one should respond to such ideas, in a country where one in eight voters just chose a right-wing populist party, motivated mainly by concerns about culture and identity.

Der Spiegel's extraordinary vaporizing of Sieferle's book from its best-seller list is an extreme example of an approach characteristic of contemporary Germany. If you go beyond a certain point in expressing what may be seen as right-wing extremist or anti-Semitic views, you are banished from

all respectable society, branded with a scarlet, or rather a brown, letter. Nazi insignia, Holocaust denial, and hate speech are banned by law (as Facebook is finding to its cost), but there is also this broader social, cultural, and political enforcement of the taboo.

Now many would argue that this has contributed significantly to the civilized, centrist quality of German politics and public debate—and they have a point. I find that many young Germans support this approach wholeheartedly. And would the rest of the world have been happier if Germany did not have this taboo on any hint of a revival of the worst that modern humanity has produced?

Yet this whole approach comes with a price, and the electoral success of the AfD shows that the price is going up. Sieferle's *Finis Germania* is a late,

It's therefore encouraging to see a growing number of German intellectuals advocating John Stuart Mill's own response. Take on these arguments in free and open debate. Subject them to vigorous and rigorous scrutiny. Separate the wheat from the chaff. For as Mill famously argued, even a false argument can contain a sliver of truth, and the good sword of truth can only be kept sharp if constantly tested in open combat with falsehood. Otherwise the received opinion, even if it is correct, will only be held "in the manner of a prejudice."

Sieferle's two posthumously published texts, taken in the context of his life's work, are eminently susceptible to the Mill treatment. While dismissing the hysterical, crypto-Nietzschean hyperbole of his last treatment of the



The opening session of the new Bundestag, Berlin, October 24, 2017.
Alice Weidel and Alexander Gauland (with hands raised) are seated in the first row of the Alternative für Deutschland section.

slight product of a sad, disordered, but undoubtedly fine mind. Simply to say "right-wing extremist, anti-Semitic, historically revisionist—therefore get thee behind me Satan and off the best-seller list you come" is a woefully inadequate response. Indeed, subjecting Sieferle to the taboo treatment actually supports his contention that this really is a taboo—that is, something put beyond the realm of rational debate.

For right-wing ideologues, such bans are wonderful free publicity, enabling them to pose as martyrs for free speech. Kubitschek, the publisher, gloated that the row at the Frankfurt book fair was "heathen fun."

For the rank-and-file, it is yet more evidence that the liberal elites have so little time and respect for them that they "won't look at us even with their asses." Worse still: they won't even let ordinary people say what they think. In a poll conducted in spring 2016 for the Freedom Index of the John Stuart Mill Institute in Heidelberg, only 57 percent of respondents said they felt that "one can freely express one's political opinion in Germany today."²

²This figure comes from an opinion poll by the highly respected Allensbach Institute. It should be noted that the alternative offered was "Is it better to be cautious?"—to which 28 percent agreed, the rest answering "with reservations" or "undecided." Quoted in *Freiheitsindex Deutschland 2016 des John Stuart Mill Instituts für Freiheitsforschung*, edited by Ulrike Ackermann (Frankfurt: Humanities Online, 2016).

"state religion" of *Vergangenheitsbewältigung*, we may yet take from it a useful challenge. More than seventy years after the end of World War II, how does one prevent German leaders' statements about the Nazi past from being reduced to empty ritual? How does one truly bring home those horrors to a generation of Germans who have known nothing of the kind? If the first commandment is not Sieferle's bitterly sarcastic "thou shalt have no other holocaust besides me," then what is it? If the answer is, as I believe it should be, "thou shalt do everything thou canst to prevent any new crimes against humanity," then what follows from that? It was on precisely these grounds that the then foreign minister Joschka Fischer eloquently made the case for German military participation in the 1999 NATO intervention in Kosovo, when faced with a possible Serbian genocide. And if you can't prevent the crime against humanity, then don't you at least have a special responsibility to take in some of its victims? Refugees from Syria in 2015, for example.

Engaging in the battle of ideas is, of course, only one part of the indispensable fight against the new right and xenophobic nationalist populism. A lot will depend on the overall performance of the expected new "Jamaica" coalition government—so-called for the colors of the four disparate parties (black for CDU and CSU, yellow for Free Democrats, and green for Green) that will each make one leg of this improbable pantomime horse. Any more terrorist attacks perpetrated by violent

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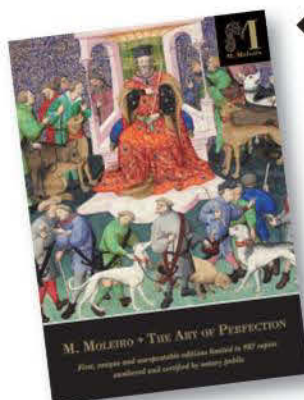
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New York Review of Books XI.17

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Islamists will stoke the angst about immigration and Islam. Showing that immigration is now actually under control will be crucial. As important will be the success or failure of Germany's attempts to integrate into schools, civic life, and the workplace the more than one million immigrants who have arrived in the last couple of years. Can they become what the scholars Her-

fried and Marina Münkler call "The New Germans"?³

The politics are such that the CSU certainly, and the CDU sooner or later, will move to the right on issues of im-

³Herfried and Marina Münkler, *Die neuen Deutschen: Ein Land vor seiner Zukunft* (Berlin: Rowohlt, 2016).

migration and identity, to try to win back the populist vote—as center-right leaders have done in neighboring Austria and the Netherlands. Even the centrist Merkel's interior minister, Thomas de Maizière, wrote earlier this year in the mass circulation *Bild-Zeitung* that "we are not Burqa"—a ludicrous sentence that may be translated as "give us your votes rather than defecting to

the Alternative." But precisely if you are moving to the right, while at the same time trying to integrate all those mainly Muslim immigrants, it becomes all the more important to fight the battle of ideas and draw a bright line between positive civic patriotism and xenophobic, new-right nationalism.

Here is the cultural struggle for Germany's future. □

Norwegian Woods

Ingrid D. Rowland

Towards the Forest: Knausgård on Munch

an exhibition at the Munch Museum, Oslo, May 6–October 8, 2017.
Catalog of the exhibition
by Karl Ove Knausgård.
Munch Museum, 102 pp., Kr 199.00

Så mye lengsel på så liten flate [So Much Longing on Such a Small Surface]

by Karl Ove Knausgård.
Oslo: Forlaget Oktober,
233 pp., Kr 399.00

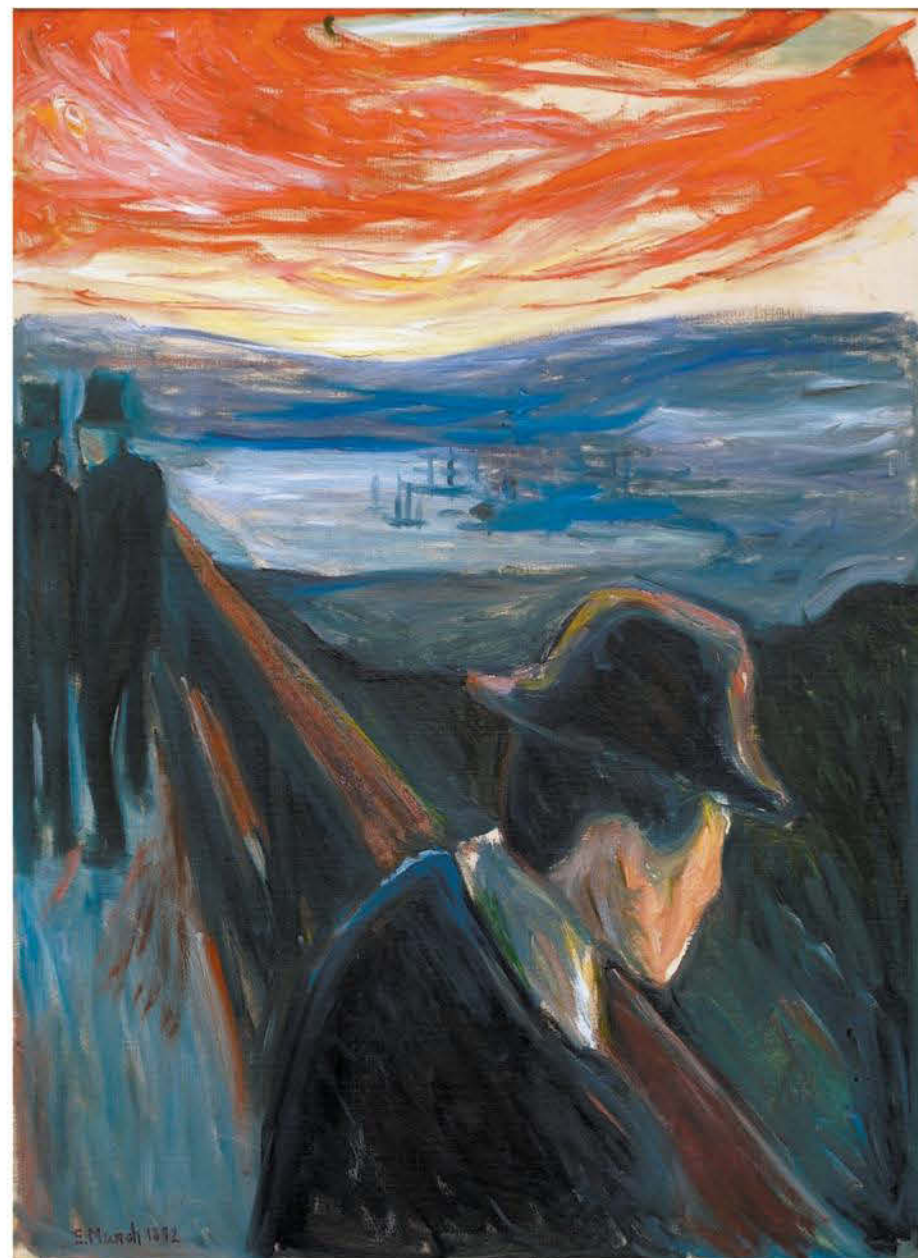
Edvard Munch:

Between the Clock and the Bed

an exhibition at the San Francisco Museum of Modern Art, June 24–October 9, 2017;
the Met Breuer, New York City, November 15, 2017–February 4, 2018;
and the Munch Museum, Oslo, May 12–September 9, 2018.
Catalog of the exhibition edited
by Gary Garrels, Jon-Ove Steihaug,
and Sheena Wagstaff, with a
preface by Karl Ove Knausgård.
Metropolitan Museum of Art,
152 pp., \$45.00

In a career that spanned more than six decades, the Norwegian artist Edvard Munch (1863–1944) produced thousands of works: woodcuts, drawings, sculptures, photographs, and restless, relentlessly experimental paintings on canvas. The Munch Museum in Oslo preserves, by its own count, "1,150 paintings, 17,800 graphic works, 7,700 drawings, 14 sculptures and numerous photographs taken by Munch himself," all present in the artist's studio when he died at eighty, and bequeathed to the city of Oslo in his will. For most of those sixty-plus years, Munch ran a successful business as a professional painter and graphic artist, exhibiting in, among other places, Berlin, Paris, Dresden, Hamburg, Cologne, Prague, Copenhagen, Zürich, Stockholm, Vienna, New York, and Pittsburgh. Between 1909 and 1914, shortly after his eight-month stay in a Danish psychiatric clinic, he created eleven monumental paintings for the Festival Hall of what was then known as the University of Kristiania. (In 1925, Kristiania took back its original Norwegian name, Oslo.) Elected to the avant-garde Berlin Secession in 1904, Munch was also awarded such accolades as the Norwegian Royal Order of Saint Olav (1908) and the French Legion of Honor (1934).

From the very beginning, his paintings excited both passion and controversy: his first solo exhibition in Berlin in 1892 closed after a tumultuous week



Edvard Munch: Sick Mood at Sunset: Despair, 1892

of fistfights between admirers and detractors. Forty-five years later, in 1937, Adolf Hitler declared Munch's painting "degenerate" and forced German museums to eliminate eighty-two of his works from their collections. In Norway itself, however, the National Socialist puppet government of Vidkun Quisling paid for a state funeral when Munch died in 1944. His stature within his own country was too great to do otherwise.

Clearly, Edvard Munch was never simply a Norwegian artist. His appeal, like his own life, has always been both local and cosmopolitan at the same time. He may be best known internationally for his anguished paintings of the 1890s, especially for the group of works (two paintings, two pastels, and a lithograph) he created between 1893 and 1910 and called, in German (he

was exhibiting in Berlin), *Der Schrei der Natur* (The Scream of Nature). In Norway, on the other hand, he is at least as well known, and deservedly so, for his monumental paintings in the Festival Hall, dedicated to the sun and its pale, oblique Nordic light.

Two recent exhibitions, one just closed in Oslo, one just opening in New York, suggest the broad range of this complicated but consistently capable artist. This summer, the Munch Museum, looking ahead to its move from excessively cramped quarters in the hillside suburb of Tøyen to a new high-rise facility on Oslo's rapidly developing eastern waterfront, opened its vast storerooms to an unusual curator: the Norwegian writer Karl Ove Knausgård. Long beguiled by the artist, about whom he has written and spoken with rare acuity, Knausgård accepted the invitation to prepare an

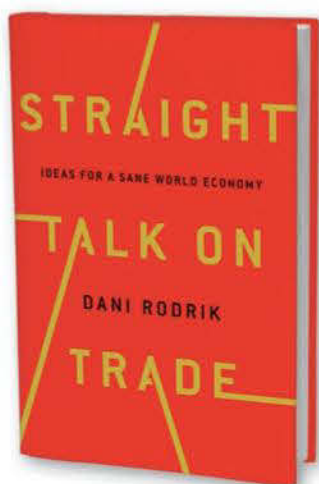
exhibition designed by the Norwegian firm Snøhetta, creators of the Oslo Opera House and the new Library of Alexandria in Egypt. Like Munch himself, both the author of the six-volume memoir *My Struggle* and the Oslo- and New York-based firm that creates "architecture, landscapes, interiors and brand design" are local figures with an international following.*

Most of the 143 paintings, sculptures, and graphic works in "Towards the Forest: Knausgård on Munch" had never been shown before, hence there was nary a *Scream* in sight. The exhibition's title and the titles of its sections—"Light and Landscape," "The Forest," "Chaos and Energy," and "The Others"—presented Munch as a marvelous painter of nature, the artist who created those sun-soaked paintings for the University Festival Hall and returned to the gnarled elms of Ekely, his estate on the outskirts of Oslo, as faithfully, and often as colorfully, as Claude Monet returned to his haystacks and Paul Cézanne to the lavender-scented slopes of Mont Sainte-Victoire. Munch purchased Ekely, a former plant nursery, in 1916, at the height of his wealth and renown, and spent the rest of his life working amid its greenery and wintry snowscapes, captivated by nature's variations on a theme that also continued to haunt him on a human level: the frieze of life. (*The Frieze of Life* was the name he gave one of his most famous sequences of paintings.)

Knausgård, whose second novel, *A Time for Everything*, is set within a gorgeously described Norwegian forest, gravitates naturally to this Munch, "the man who craved colour and embraced the world, and who loved painting." "Throughout his life," Knausgård reminded visitors to the exhibition, "throughout all of his various phases, [Munch] also painted pictures full of light and colour, harmonious and beautiful landscapes, bare coastal rock formations, the ocean, lawns, trees and flowers, and later in life, humans at work, in fields or in gardens." It is a world of poppies, verdant lawns, swimming boys doing the breaststroke in the deep blue sea, white-clad women dancing in the lemon-colored summer sunlight. The woodcut series called *Towards the Forest I* (1897), used for the catalog cover, sets an embracing

*"Knausgård" is the Swedish spelling of the writer's name (he now lives in Sweden); his previous books have been published with the Norwegian spelling "Knausgaard."

Changing the Conversations that Change the World



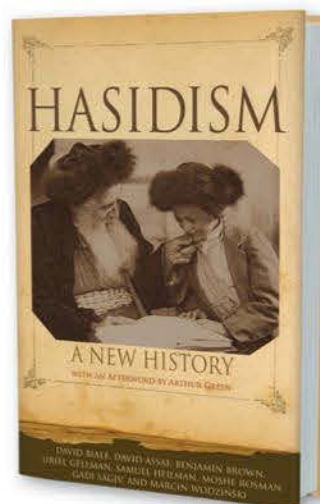
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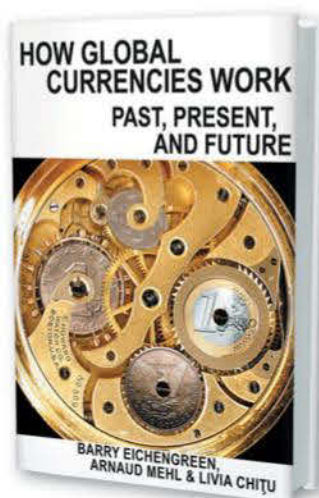
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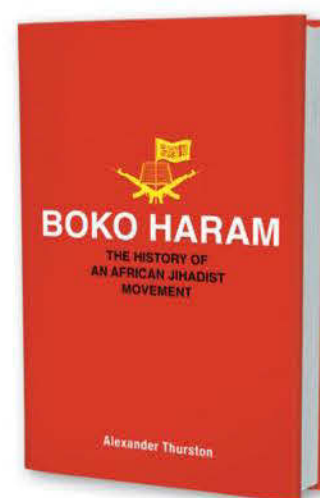
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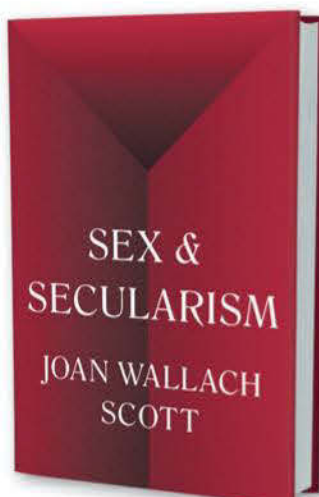
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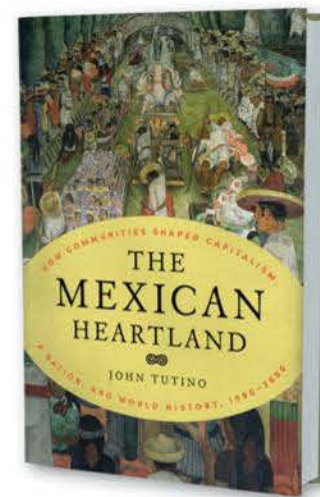
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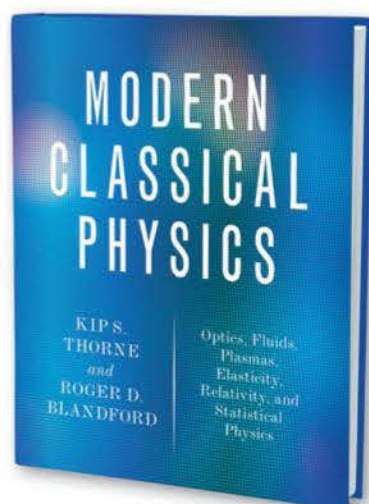
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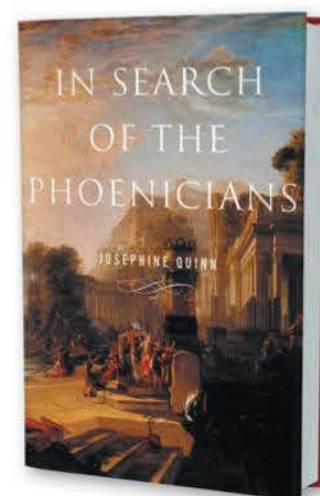
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couple, a nude woman and a clothed man, against a backdrop of tall pines, the trees and figures competing for attention with the prominent grain of the woodblock itself. The colors Munch chose for his first version of the print present a ravishing contrast of peach tones for the woman's flesh and the forest floor and a shimmering alternation of verdigris and teal blue for the background. Of this woodblock image, Knausgård writes:

The figures are strangely awkward, almost as though drawn by a child, yet the picture has a roughness to it, something rudimentary and untamed, which juxtaposes the awkward aspect, making it tender and frail. So much longing on such a small surface. And so much energy, so much expressiveness in the forest, because the fact that the picture is carved into a woodblock and then printed on paper is so apparent. This was something Munch worked at, the materiality of the pictures he made, the pictures were not only an image of something, but also something in themselves, an object in the world.

The haunting phrase "so much longing on such a small surface" appears again as the title of Knausgård's most recent book, *Så mye lengsel på så liten flate*, a collection of essays about Munch's art published to coincide with the opening of "Towards the Forest." In keeping with the exhibition's emphasis on light, color, and landscape, the first picture he examines is Munch's 1915 painting of a cabbage patch.

Beneath woodblock prints like *Towards the Forest* and *Mystical Shore* (1897), and Knausgård's response to them, we can sense the specifically Nordic way in which wood signifies both wilderness and civilization, from the sleek hulls of Viking ships to the ship-shape compactness of medieval stave churches—a profound connection with the forest that also underpins Grimms' fairy tales but is increasingly distant from much of the modern world. It is a link that Greece and Italy, for example, lost in antiquity, when the great trees fell to shipbuilders and charcoal burners, that the Amazon basin is losing now, and that desert societies never had. It is impossible to understand Munch, really, without including the trees that dominate this exhibition with their greens and browns, whether straight-up pines or ancient elms with twisted trunks.

Knausgård is equally perceptive in picking up the subtle traces of life in Munch's paintings of German farmland under snow:

The reason Munch found this landscape [*Snow Landscape, Thuringia, 1906*] worthy of five pictures, I assume has to do with the snow, with the fact that the layer of snow is so thin that the colours shine through. A field leads into the depth of the picture, the white is broken up by reddish, brownish and green stripes. In the background is a yellow area with a little house, and behind it a dark green area that

must be a forest. The sky above is a dirty white, almost yellow. None of this says very much, for the fact of the matter is that the picture lives. It has a resonance, it has fluctuations, it is almost like music. The resonance is what the emotions relate to and what lifts them, just as music can lift emotions.

Knausgård also gravitates to paintings of the sun, from a burst of pale yellow rays mirrored in a fjord (*The Sun, 1910–1913*) to the low-lying, piercing rays that penetrate through the trees to light up the delicate pastels of a luminous white plow horse and sea-green shrubbery in *The Pathfinder* (1911–1912). Munch quickly turned the reflection of the moon on the waters of sea and fjord into a personal cipher, a



Edvard Munch: Towards the Forest I, 1897

dotted "i" signifying pure mystery, as in the woodblock print *Mystical Shore* and in many of his paintings.

There was also room in "Towards the Forest" for the more familiar Munch of claustrophobic rooms and tormented relationships, not to mention the graphic violence of *Sigurd Slembe* (1909). "Sigurd the Noisy" (this is the meaning of *Slembe*) was a twelfth-century pretender to the throne of Norway, whose life and gruesome death figured in Norse sagas and in an immensely popular trilogy by the Norwegian dramatist Bjørnstjerne Bjørnson, the 1903 Nobel laureate in literature. Munch has set the would-be king's atrocious execution in a green field of frenzied brushwork, a glorious sea view marred by the sight of the spread-eagled Sigurd, bleeding from the first blows of the hammer-axe that mark only the beginning of his ordeal. A few years later, Munch sketched out a terrifying *Blood Waterfall* (1915–1916).

The last section of the exhibition, "The Others," displayed a series of portraits in paint and print, including a parting view of the young Munch himself in 1888, the surface of the portrait scraped and distressed to call attention, perhaps, to its status as an object. The latest work on view, a lush summer scene of a man painting the side of a house, was created in 1942. Knausgård lingers over the image, one of the last Munch ever made:

Just a sloppily rendered everyday scene, bounded on every side by insignificance.

Was this where sixty-four years of painting experience had brought him?

In a way it was. Munch knew very well how to paint a man on a ladder with photographic realism and anatomical precision... he also knew how to paint a man in a garden on a summer day impressionistically, and he presumably also knew how he should paint a man on a ladder in the manner of Munch. When he didn't do this, it was because none of the techniques could help him to achieve what he was after. They would, on the contrary, be in his way.

A bemused Knausgård suggests a possible answer to what Munch was after in that garden in the summer of 1942, with the Nazis in charge of his country and a new world war underway:

Knowing that Munch was seventy-eight years old when he painted it, and that he was Norway's undisputed great artist, for many the very personification of *The Artist*, it is difficult not to view the picture as an ironic commentary on his own work. The man on the ladder is painting a house, Munch is painting a picture—what exactly is the difference?

In the midst of horror in the world outside, the elderly painter, no stranger himself to horror and turmoil, captures a moment of pure, sunlit joy, it, too, a rightful part of existence.

Throughout his career, Munch experimented incessantly with technique, applying paint to untreated canvas, diluting his pigments with turpentine so that they ran down the canvas in colored rivulets, scraping away impasto to create a rough, textured surface. He left his work outdoors, where rain and bird droppings did their worst, and was so frugal with paint that he would rather apply a daub of random color somewhere on the work than simply clean it off his brush. We can see how he began his canvases with clean, clear colors and kept on painting even when his brush had become loaded with a mud-colored mix. He was a messy painter, forever on the lookout for a better way to capture a mood or a moment.

The artist who appears in the Met Breuer's exhibition "Edvard Munch: Between the Clock and the Bed" is a more familiar figure than the Munch revealed in Oslo by Knausgård's "Towards the Forest." Rather than the colors of the open air, we have confined interiors bursting out in rebellious shades of yellow, orange, and red (although these intense shades are traditional for Norwegian houses), and the selection of fifty-one paintings puts all the artist's early angst in full view. Many of these images are well-known landmarks in Munch's career, from the delicate pastel blues and variegated whites of *Morning* (1884), one of the first paintings he ever exhibited in public, to *The Sick Child* (1896), his first

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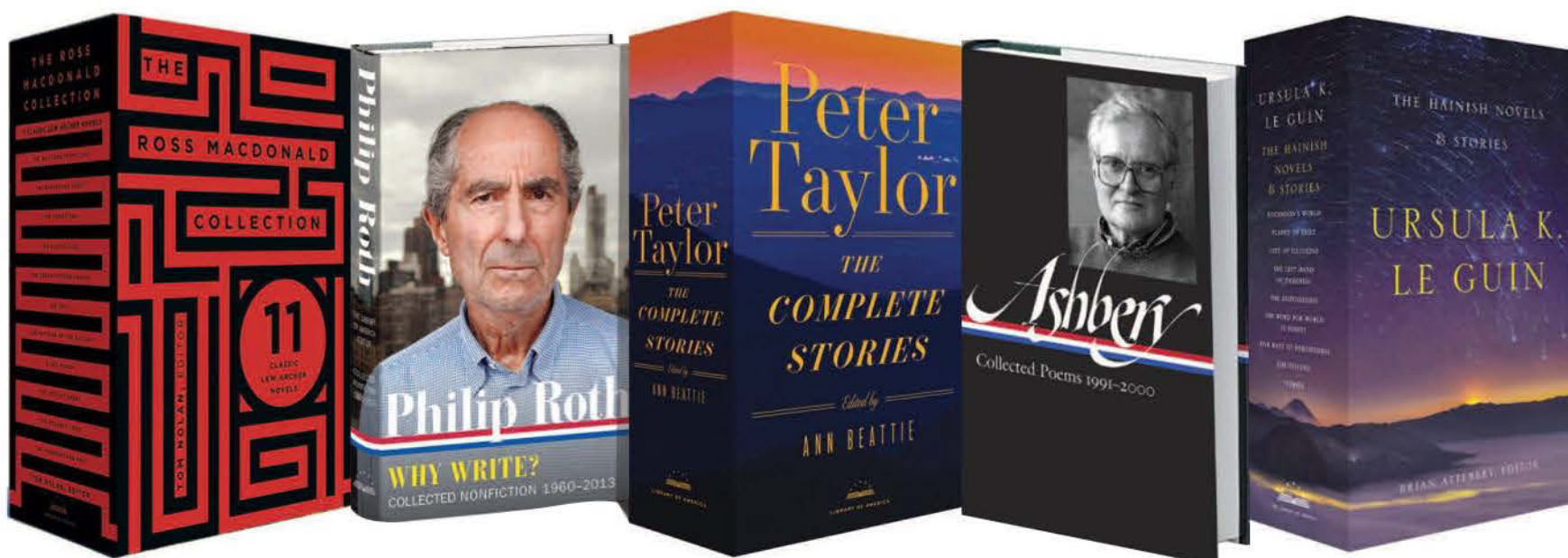
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max ernst: beyond painting

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Max Ernst, Oedipus, volume IV from A Week of Kindness or the Seven Capital Elements (detail), 1933–34. Line block after collage, from a five-volume illustrated book with 132 line blocks after collages. Publisher: Editions Jeanne Bucher, Paris. Printer: Georges Duval, Paris. The Museum of Modern Art, New York. The Louis E. Stern Collection. Photo: Robert Gerhardt. © 2017 Artists Rights Society (ARS), New York/ADAGP, Paris

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great success, to his early *Self-Portrait with Cigarette* (1895), with its vapor-thin paint and its abraded surfaces, to the seductive black-haired siren he called, with bitter irony, *Madonna* (1894).

Munch's childhood was marked by an agonizing series of losses—his parents, his sister (the original Sick Child)—and by several of his own brushes with death (to which *Death in the Sick Room* of 1893 and several related paintings may refer). *Inheritance* (1897–1899) expresses the artist's anxious awareness of his family's legacy of madness and consumption: a spectral baby, presumably Munch himself, lies listlessly in the lap of a tubercular woman who spits blood into a handkerchief, accidentally (and lethally) spattering her infant's pallid flesh with crimson flecks.

Sick Mood at Sunset: Despair (1892) anticipates *The Scream*, the first version of which was painted the following year: a man in a fedora stands at precisely the same spot on the Ekeberg promontory overlooking Oslofjord, as a setting sun dyes the sky blood red, catching the planes of the man's face and outlining his hat and his white starched collar in a ruddy glow. Rather than looking out at us like the anguished protagonist of *The Scream*, this desolate figure, oblivious to the glorious natural halo that encloses him, slumps over a railing, his eyeless gaze directed toward the Old City, the eastern part of Kristiania (incidentally, not far from where Juan Herreros's new L-shaped Munch Museum will rise in 2020). The thick, agitated brushwork turns the despondent man's psychological isolation into a separation in space as well as in feeling, dividing him from the other passersby on the scenic overlook and from the fjord and city beneath them. Munch traced his best-known image to an experience on the Ekeberg:

One evening I was walking along a path, the city was on one side and the fjord below. I felt tired and ill. I stopped and looked out over the fjord—the sun was setting, and the clouds turning blood red. I sensed a scream passing through nature; it seemed to me that I heard the scream. I painted this picture, painted the clouds as actual blood. The color shrieked. This became *The Scream*.

Munch thus presents his shrieking figure, like his own art, as a lightning rod for all of nature rather than a person imprisoned in private grief.

In a different palette, the paintings on display in New York show the same restless search after expressive technique. An extensive collection of self-portraits takes Munch from the beginnings of his career to the end of his life, through an ambitious youth, an anguished middle age, and what must have been a relatively peaceful seniority. The opaque paint and distressed surface of an early *Self-Portrait* (1886) project almost the same ravaged glow as a Pompeian painting or an ancient icon, but rather than looking out directly at us as ancient figures do, the very young Munch casts a sidelong glance, supremely diffident. A few years later, he has assumed the trappings of adulthood: a mustache and a

cigarette, whose swirling smoke, like his jacket, is rendered in layers of paint so thin that the canvas peeks through. Yet another portrait has him leaning on his hand, probably inspired by *Portrait of Dr. Gachet* (1890) by Vincent van Gogh, in which the subject assumes the same position, but Munch renders his own figure in transparent strokes rather than van Gogh's dense spots of color.

Munch's troubled dealings with women feature prominently in many of his most angst-ridden paintings, although the Copenhagen clinic where he spent much of 1908 and 1909 blamed his psychiatric problems on alcohol. In Berlin, where he lived from 1892 to 1896, his drinking partners at the Black Piglet tavern famously included August Strindberg (of whom he made two splendid portraits, a painting and a lithograph, before they quarreled and split). His love affairs all ended badly, if inspirationally for his art, and two self-portraits with a model from 1919–1921, with their evident erotic charge, suggest in radiant tones of yellow and indigo blue how this solitary man found companionship in his later years.

The Met Breuer's exhibition catalog includes a useful essay by Mille Stein on Munch's technique, which will help visitors to understand the extent and significance of his lifelong experimentation in various media. Patricia Berman's study of Munch as a canny businessman who managed his own career for most of his life calls into question his conventional image as a tormented neurasthenic—even during his eight-month stay in Dr. Jacobson's psychiatric clinic, he was managing his own exhibition schedule. Allison Morehead and Richard Schiff seem to be addressing a strictly American academic audience with their ritual bows to the likes of Michel Foucault and Clement Greenberg, neither of whom had much to say on Edvard Munch. It is not surprising, really, that a Norwegian would fall outside Greenberg's epic progress of modern art, when Quisling was a recent memory, and all roads were destined to lead to New York. Morehead refers on several occasions to the witty Reinhold Heller, author of a 1984 study of Munch's life and work, who would no doubt have written a sparkling essay, and one of wider appeal.

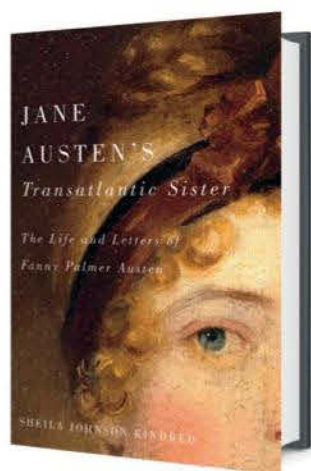
Instead, for a museum ostensibly dedicated to the people of New York in the same spirit that the Munch Museum is dedicated to the people of Oslo, it is once again Karl Ove Knausgård, in a preface written especially for this catalog, and this much different collection of paintings, who strikes the most resonant note:

If you have ever stood in a room in front of a painting by Munch, or Van Gogh or Rembrandt for that matter, you will know that part of the painting's magic is that it brings together its time and yours, its place and yours, and there is comfort in that, because even the distance that is inherent in loneliness is suspended in that moment.

Comfort, magic, bringing together—and that glorious yellow. These, too, not just the anguish, dance thrillingly through Edvard Munch's frieze of life. □



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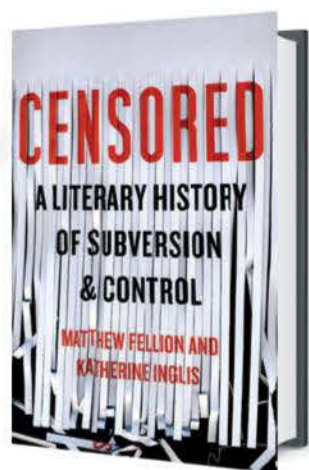


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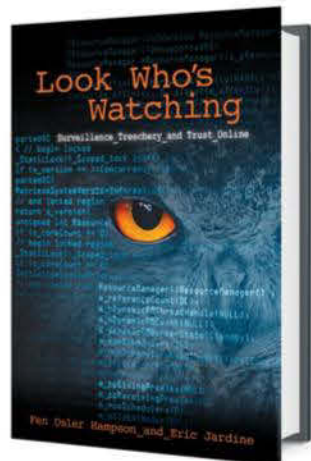


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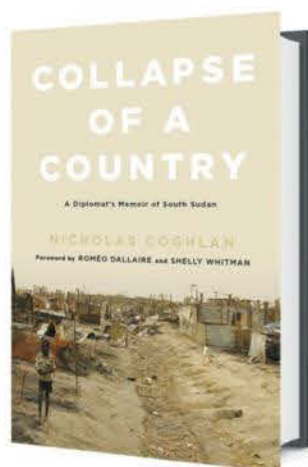


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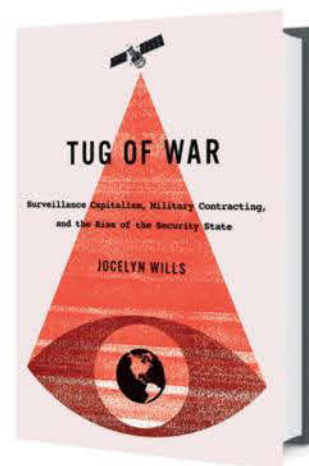


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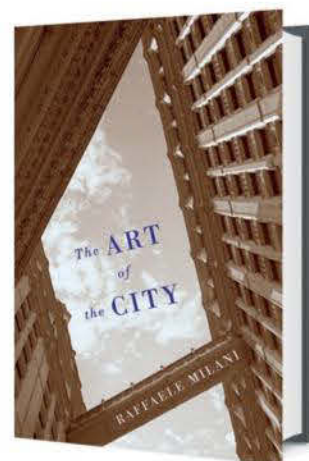
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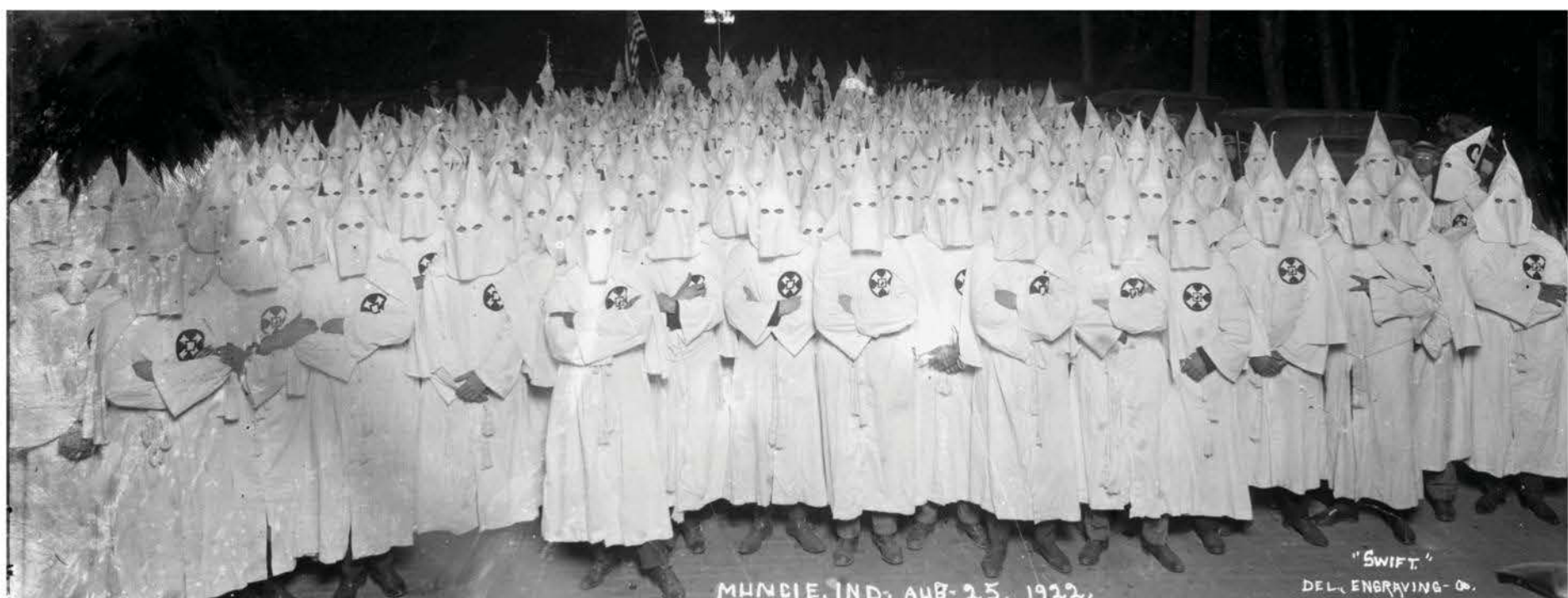
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Ku Klux Klambakes

Adam Hochschild



Ku Klux Klan paraders, Muncie, Indiana, 1922

The Second Coming of the KKK: The Ku Klux Klan of the 1920s and the American Political Tradition

by Linda Gordon.

Liveright, 272 pp., \$27.95

Ku Klux Kulture:

America and the Klan in the 1920s

by Felix Harcourt.

University of Chicago Press,
272 pp., \$45.00

Most of us who grow up in the United States learn a reassuring narrative of ever-expanding tolerance. Yes, the country's birth was tainted with the original sin of slavery, but Lincoln freed the slaves, the Supreme Court desegregated schools, and we finally elected a black president. The Founding Fathers may have all been men, but in their wisdom they created a constitution that would later allow women to gain the vote. And now the legal definition of marriage has broadened to include gays and lesbians. We are, it appears, an increasingly inclusive nation.

But a parallel, much darker river runs through American history. The Know Nothing Party of the 1850s viciously attacked Catholics and immigrants. Eugenics enthusiasts of the early twentieth century warned about the nation's gene pool being polluted by ex-slaves, the feeble minded, and newcomers of inferior races. In the 1930s, 16 million Americans regularly listened to the anti-Semitic radio rants of Father Charles E. Coughlin.

The most notorious of all the currents in this dark river has been the Ku Klux Klan. It flourished first in the South after the Civil War, lynching and terrorizing African-Americans who tried to vote, and then gradually disbanded in the early 1870s under pressure from the federal government. After a long spell of quiescence, it reemerged into national prominence in the 1920s, reaching an all-time peak membership in 1924—a year, incidentally, that saw the dedication of various Confederate memorials, including the Robert E. Lee statue in Charlottesville, Virginia, whose planned removal was the

pretext for the “Unite the Right” rally there in August. After another eclipse, the Klan roared back to life a third time in protest against the civil rights movement of the 1960s. Among other acts of violence, Klansmen took part in the murder of three voter registration workers near Philadelphia, Mississippi, in the summer of 1964—James Chaney, Michael Schwerner, and Andrew Goodman.

All along, of course, even while sticking to rhetoric of tolerance and inclusion, politicians have made winks and nods toward that dark river of which the Klan is a part. Richard Nixon had his Southern Strategy. Running for president in 1980, Ronald Reagan sent an unmistakable message by giving a speech about states' rights near Philadelphia, Mississippi. George H.W. Bush used the notorious Willie Horton campaign commercial. And now suddenly, it's no longer just winks and nods. Only when pressed by a reporter did Donald Trump in early 2016 reluctantly disavow the support of Klan leader David Duke. “David Duke endorsed me? O.K., all right. I disavow, O.K.?” Then as president he outraged people around the world by equating antiracist protesters with the unsavory brew of white nationalists, neo-Nazis, and Klan members who gathered at Charlottesville, declaring that there were “some very fine people on both sides.” One of the least fine among the right-wingers rammed his car into a crowd of counterdemonstrators, killing one and injuring many others. Once again, it seems, the Klan is elbowing its way back into American public life.

The first and third incarnations of the Klan—the cross-burning lynch mobs and the vigilantes who beat up and murdered civil rights workers in the 1960s—seem beyond the pale of today's politics, at least for the moment. But the second Klan, the Klan of the 1920s, less violent but far more widespread, is a different story, and one that offers some chilling comparisons to the present day. It embodied the same racism at its core but served it up be-

neath a deceptively benign façade, in all-American patriotic colors.

In other ways as well, the Klan of the 1920s strongly echoes the world of Donald Trump. This Klan was a movement, but also a profit-making business. On economic issues, it took a few mildly populist stands. It was heavily supported by evangelicals. It was deeply hostile to science and trafficked in false assertions. And it was masterfully guided by a team of public relations advisers as skillful as any political consultants today.

Two new books give us a fresh look at this second period of the Klan. Linda Gordon's *The Second Coming of the KKK* is the wiser and deeper; Felix Harcourt's *Ku Klux Kulture* offers some useful background information but then, reflecting its origin as a Ph.D. thesis, becomes an exhaustive survey of Klansmen's appearances, variously as heroes or villains, in the era's novels, movies, songs, plays, musicals, and more.

The KKK's rebirth was spurred by D.W. Griffith's landmark 1915 film, *Birth of a Nation*. The most expensive and widely seen motion picture that had yet been made, it featured rampaging mobs of newly freed slaves in the post-Civil War South colluding with rapacious northern carpetbaggers. To the rescue comes the Ku Klux Klan, whose armed and mounted heroes lynch a black villain, save the honor of southern womanhood, and prevent the ominous prospect of blacks at the ballot box. “It is like teaching history with lightning,” said an admiring President Woodrow Wilson, an ardent segregationist, who saw the film in the White House. Wilson's comment underlines a point both Gordon and Harcourt make: the Klan of this era was no fringe group, for tens of millions of nonmembers agreed with its politics.

The founder of the reincarnated Klan in 1915 was an Atlanta physician named William Joseph Simmons, who five years later fell into the hands of two skilled public relations profes-

sionals, Elizabeth Tyler and Edward Young Clarke. They convinced him that for the Klan to gain members in other parts of the country, it had to add Jews, Catholics, immigrants, and big-city elites to its list of villains. Tyler and Clarke in effect ran the KKK for the next several years, a pair of Bannons to Simmons's Trump.

Simmons signed a contract giving the two an amazing 80 percent of dues and other revenue gleaned from new recruits. They are believed to have reaped \$850,000—worth more than \$11 million today—in their first fifteen months on the job. The whole enterprise was organized on a commission basis: everyone from the recruiters, or Kleagles, up through higher officers (King Kleagles, Grand Goblins, and more) kept a percentage of the initiation fee (\$10, the equivalent of \$122 today) and monthly dues. The movement was a highly lucrative brand.

Tyler and Clarke polished Simmons's speaking style and set up newspaper interviews for him, gave free Klan memberships to Protestant ministers, and assured prominent placement of their blizzard of press releases by buying tens of thousands of dollars' worth of newspaper advertising. To appear respectable, they made these purchases through two well-known ad agencies, one of which had a Jewish CEO. Simmons, however, spent much of his share of the take on horse races, prizefights, and drink. Several rivals who lusted after the KKK's lucrative income stream maneuvered him out of office with the help of Tyler and Clarke.

A plump, diminutive Texas dentist, Hiram Evans, became the new Imperial Wizard in 1922. He, in turn, his eye on Tyler and Clarke's 80 percent of revenues, was able to force them out because of a scandal—the two were sexually involved but each was married to someone else. Linda Gordon gives Tyler major credit for the Klan's success: “The organization might well have grown without this driven, bold, corrupt, and precociously entrepreneurial woman, but it would likely have been smaller.” About other women

in the Klan, such as one group called Ladies of the Invisible Empire, Gordon dryly notes, “Readers... must rid themselves of notions that women’s politics are always kinder, gentler, and less racist than men’s.”

Significantly, the new Wizard moved the Klan’s headquarters to Washington, D.C. Membership skyrocketed, reaching an estimated four million by 1924. The revenue remained enormous: beyond dues, there were sales of Klan insurance, knives, trinkets, and garb. Those robes and pointed hoods were made to an exacting pattern, sold at a big markup, and, until his ouster, could only be purchased from a company owned by Clarke. The temptations of this fountain of money led to further rivalries and embezzlement, compounded by the conviction of several Klan leaders for various sordid offenses, most spectacularly the Indiana Grand Dragon for the rape and murder of a young woman who worked for him—a crime that left his bite marks all over her body. All of this made the Klan largely collapse by the end of the decade—but not before it had helped win an enormous legislative victory, and not before there occurred a curious episode involving the Trump family.

Before we get to that, however, there’s another odd parallel between the Klan of the 1920s and the present day, which has to do with the sheer value of getting attention in the media. Many newspapers campaigned against the KKK, and no less than five such exposés won Pulitzer Prizes. The first was for an excoriating series of stories in the *New York World* in 1921 that revealed secret Klan rituals and code words, gave the names of more than two hundred officials, and listed violent crimes committed by Klansmen. The heavily promoted articles ran for three weeks, were reprinted by seventeen newspapers throughout the country, and provoked a congressional investigation. But instead of crushing the organization, the exposé did the opposite; one historian estimates that the series increased Klan membership by more than a million. Some people even tried to join by filling out the blank membership application form the *World* had used to illustrate one story.

Being denounced by a liberal New York newspaper, it turned out, gave the Klan just the political imprimatur it needed, and spread the news of its rebirth across the nation. Imperial Wizard Evans exulted that the exposés had provided “fifty million dollars’ worth of free advertising.” People loved the idea of joining a fraternal organization with secret rites and extravagant titles that included judges, congressmen, and other prominent citizens, and that legitimized combat against the forces that seemed to be undermining traditional American life.

What were those forces? Movements heavy on ethnic hatred and imagined conspiracies flourish when rapid changes upset the social order and people feel their income or status threatened. In the heyday of European fascism, the threat came from the enormous job losses of the Great Depression, which in Germany followed the humiliating Versailles Treaty and ruinous inflation that wiped out savings. Among many of Trump’s supporters today, the threat comes from stagnat-

ing or declining wages and the rapid automation and globalization that makes people feel their jobs are ever less secure.

We don’t normally think of the heady, expanding American economy of the 1920s as a period of threat, but Gordon offers a broader cultural and feminist analysis. “The Klan supplied a way for members to confirm manliness,” she writes, in an era when many traditional male roles were disappearing. “As more men became white-collar workers, as more small businesses lost out to chains, as the political supremacy of Anglo-Saxons became contested, as more women reached for economic and political rights,” the Klan “organized the performances of masculinity and male bonding through uniforms, parades, rituals, secrecy, and hierarchical military ranks and titles.” She quotes an admonition from one Oregon chapter: “Remember when you come to lodge that this is not an old maid’s convention.” A man who by day might be an accountant or stationery salesman or have a wife who earned more than he did could, in his Klan robes, be a Kleagle or Klaliff or Exalted Cyclops by night.

Not all Klan members were men, of course, and the Klan was not the only organization that offered ceremonial dress and fancy titles: it’s telling that the first place Klan recruiters usually sought members was among Masons. But Gordon’s is a thoughtful explanation of the Klan’s appeal in the fast-urbanizing America of the 1920s, which was leaving behind an earlier nation based, in imagined memory, on self-sufficient yeoman farmers, proud blue-collar workers, and virtuous small-town businessmen, all of them going to the same white-steepled church on Sunday. It was a world in which men did traditionally manly work and women’s place was in the kitchen and bedroom. Even city-dwellers—perhaps especially city-dwellers—could feel this nostalgia. (Although, as with many idealized pasts, the reality was less ideal: many late-nineteenth-century farmers and small businessmen went bankrupt or deep into debt, casualties of a string of recessions and declining world commodity prices.)

All these feelings, of course, came on top of centuries of racism. And that hostility was surely exacerbated during the 1920s when the Great Migration of African-Americans out of the South was well underway, making black faces visible to millions who had seldom or never seen them before.

Demagogic movements prey on such anxieties by identifying scapegoats. One of the revived Klan’s targets is familiar to us from today’s demagogues: immigrants. By 1890, the ships streaming past the Statue of Liberty to Ellis Island were bringing people from new places, mainly southern and eastern Europe: Jews fleeing anti-Semitism, especially in the Russian Empire, Polish and Italian Catholics, and a continuing flow of immigrants from Catholic Ireland. The Klan wanted these new arrivals cut off and such immigrants already here to be deported.

This paranoia toward immigrants blended easily with the hostility to Catholics and Jews that many Americans already shared. Henry Ford circulated the notorious *Protocols of the*

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Elders of Zion; Klan officials, early experts in fake news, concocted similar forgeries about Catholic plots to take bloody vengeance on all Protestants. To WASP Klan members, Catholics seemed threatening because Irish political machines had taken control of many cities in the Northeast and Midwest. The pope was suspect because his was an international empire, based outside the United States. To make things even more un-American, mass was conducted in Latin, and many Catholics and Jews spoke foreign languages at home. In an apparently populist gesture, the Klan advocated more spending on public schools and libraries, but this was interwoven with demands to ban parochial schools.

Jews, of course, had been convenient scapegoats for centuries, and their prominence in banking, in the eyes of the Klan and many others, meant that they surely had had a sinister hand in causing the financial panics that affected millions of Americans so painfully between 1890 and 1914. Furthermore, Jews were undermining American morals through their control of Hollywood, tempting people out of Protestant church pews and into movie theaters. The Klan was particularly enraged by a 1923 silent film, *The Pilgrim*, in which Charlie Chaplin appeared as a hypocritical minister. A stream of manufactured stories in Klan publications also accused Jews of masterminding the white slave trade. And if you should want proof that Jews could never be assimilated in America, it was right there in the Bible: Jonah emerged from his ordeal whole, indigestible even by the whale.

From Jewish bankers and movie moguls it was a short step to another set of Klan villains: big-city “elites” who tried to dictate to salt-of-the-earth true Americans how they should live. These elites were, according to one Klansman quoted by Gordon, “a cosmopolitan intelligentsia devoted to foreign creeds and ethnic identities...without moral standards.” Another wrote, “The Nordic American today is a stranger in... the land his fathers gave him.” And of course, every condemnation of the Klan by a big-city intellectual merely confirmed this feeling. The Klan also hated professional boxing (in the 1920s dominated by Jews and Catholics), jazz (blacks), and Broadway show tunes (Jews); Klan members attacked dance halls and were suspects in the burning down of a Maryland boxing arena. Another point of controversy, inflamed by the 1925 Scopes trial, was evolution, seen as a Jewish and highbrow conspiracy to undermine Christian doctrine; the Klan pushed for state laws against teaching it. On this issue, and on many others, evangelical churches were important KKK allies.

In the South, the revived Klan stuck to its traditional vigilantism: lynchings of black Americans continued, sometimes several dozen a year. And on occasion violence spread to the North: in 1925, for example, Klan members on horseback attacked the Omaha home of Reverend Earl Little, an organizer for Marcus Garvey’s “Back to Africa” movement. Little wasn’t home, but his pregnant wife and three children were. The Klansmen galloped around the house with flaming torches and shattered all the windows. In Michigan, where the family moved after the baby was born, vigilantes burned their house

to the ground. The baby grew up to become Malcolm X.

Most of the time, however, in the northern states where the 1920s Klan thrived—its highest per capita membership was in Indiana and Oregon—it presented a less violent face. In 1925 forty-six chartered trains brought some 30,000 Klansmen to the nation’s capital, where they marched down Pennsylvania Avenue (robes and hoods, but no masks) and held a rally at the Washington Monument. The next day they laid wreaths on the Tomb of the Unknown Soldier and on the grave of William Jennings Bryan, who had argued against evolution at the Scopes trial. You can see film of the march on YouTube, with the Capitol building in the background.

Following in the public relations tradition inaugurated by Tyler and Clarke, the Klan mixed its arcane midnight rituals with everything from Klambakes to a Klan summer resort to the Klan Haven orphanage in Harrisburg, Pennsylvania. It sponsored sports tournaments for all ages, Bible study groups, gun clubs, and children’s camps, and had its own auto-racing stadium in Denver. Baseball, the ultimate American small-town game, was the most popular Klan sport, and in Wichita in 1925, Klan players even took on, and lost to, a local semipro all-black team. One year later, in Washington, D.C., another Klan team played the Hebrew All-Stars. It was masterful PR: who could accuse such an organization of being prejudiced?

All of these activities ensured plentiful newspaper coverage: Klan parades, beauty contests, minstrel shows, picnics, and even midnight Klonklaves (to enhance the aura of mystery, photographers were kept at a distance). Like it or hate it, readers were hungry for such news, and the result, writes Harcourt, was that an “odd kind of legitimacy” was “tacitly bestowed on the Klan.” The newly launched *Time* put Imperial Wizard Evans on its cover in 1924. The Klan also had an extensive press of its own: the weekly *Kourier* published sixteen state editions and claimed a readership of 1.5 million—although such numbers were usually inflated. Sympathizers controlled two radio stations, both, incidentally, in New York City. Klan members were a significant enough demographic that businesses found it worthwhile to come up with names like Kountry Kitchen or Kwik Kar Wash or to merely advertise themselves as “100% American.”

The Klan of the 1920s went to great lengths to polish its image because its real mission, aside from lining the pockets of its leaders, was in electoral politics. And here it was highly influential. In 1924 the organization mobilized hundreds of Protestant clergymen across the country whose sermons helped deny the Democratic presidential nomination to New York Governor Al Smith, a Catholic and vocal Klan opponent. Twenty thousand people attended an anti-Smith cross-burning in New Jersey two weeks before the Democratic convention. And in 1928, when

Smith did get nominated, Klan opposition doubtless added to the margin by which he lost the general election to Herbert Hoover.

In alliance with other groups, the Klan won major victories on the state level. One of its causes, for instance, was eugenics laws, which allowed the forcible sterilization of those of “defective stock”—who all too often turned out to be nonwhite. Some thirty states adopted such legislation. In Oregon, KKK member Kaspar K. Kubli (the Klan was so delighted by his initials that it exempted him from dues) was speaker of the house. “For ten years, 1922 to 1932,” writes Gordon, “the



Members of the Ku Klux Klan, Alabama, 1992

majority of all Oregon’s elected officials were Klansmen, and opposition was so weak that Klansmen ran against one another.” In the mid-1920s, the majority of representatives elected to Congress from Texas, Colorado, and Indiana were Klan members, as were two justices of the US Supreme Court. Texas Congressman Hatton Sumners, a member, used his position as chair of the House Judiciary Committee to try to block an anti-lynching law. Sixteen senators and eleven governors in all were Klansmen, divided almost equally between Democrats and Republicans. From Wilson through Hoover, no president disavowed the Klan.

In 1924 came the great triumph of the Klan and its allies: harsh new immigration limits that virtually excluded Asians from moving to the United States, sharply reduced the number of immigrants admitted, and set national quotas ensuring that the great majority of them would come from the British Isles or Germany. (The quotas were cleverly based on what the ethnic origins of the American population had been in 1890—before the height of immigration from southern and eastern Europe.) This law, the Johnson-Reed Act, was sponsored by Congressman Albert Johnson of Washington State, whom Gordon calls a Klansman. Others are less certain of his actual membership, but in any event he was

ardently supported by the Klan, and the law bearing his name helped shape the country for forty years to come.)

Sometimes what doesn’t happen is revealing. If upheavals that threaten people’s jobs and status provide the classic fuel for movements like the KKK, then in the 1930s, when the Depression threw a quarter of the American labor force out of work and left hundreds of thousands living in shacks of scrap wood and tarpaper, why didn’t the Klan come back to life stronger than ever? One answer is that Franklin D. Roosevelt’s New Deal, despite its shortcomings, was a far-reaching and impassioned attempt to address the nation’s economic woes and injustices head-on, with a boldness we’ve not seen since then. It gave people hope. Another answer is that although FDR made many compromises with southern Democrats to get his programs through Congress, he was no racist. The more outspoken Eleanor Roosevelt was a fervent proponent of anti-lynching laws and of full rights for black Americans. The tone set by the White House matters; it creates moral space for others to speak and act. Perhaps it’s no surprise that these were years when the Klan lay low.

In all three of its historical incarnations, the KKK had many allies, not all of whom wanted to dress up in pointed hoods and hold ceremonies at night. But such public actions always have an echo. “The Klan did not invent bigotry,” Linda Gordon writes, “... [but] making its open expression acceptable has significant additional impact.” Those burning crosses legitimated the expression of hatred, and exactly the same can be said of presidential tweets today.

She ends her book by writing, “The Klannish spirit—fearful, angry, gullible to sensationalist falsehoods, in thrall to demagogic leaders and abusive language, hostile to science and intellectuals, committed to the dream that everyone can be a success in business if they only try—lives on.” One intriguing episode links the Klan of ninety years ago to us now. On Memorial Day 1927, a march of some one thousand Klansmen through the Jamaica neighborhood of Queens, New York, turned into a brawl with the police. Several people wearing Klan hoods, either marching in the parade or sympathizers cheering from the sidelines, were charged with disorderly conduct, and one with “refusing to disperse.” Although the charge against the latter was later dropped, his name was mentioned in several newspaper accounts of the fracas. Beneath the hood was Fred Trump, the father of Donald.* □

*This story first surfaced briefly some two years ago, but drew little attention since Donald Trump—who, characteristically, denied everything—was not yet the Republican presidential nominee. The most thorough account is Mike Pearl’s “All the Evidence We Could Find About Fred Trump’s Alleged Involvement with the KKK,” *Vice*, March 10, 2016.

Philip Jones Griffiths/Magnum Photos

Moreau, C'est Nous

Edmund White

Flaubert in the Ruins of Paris: The Story of a Friendship, a Novel, and a Terrible Year
by Peter Brooks.

Basic Books, 241 pp., \$32.00

Ford Madox Ford said that one had to read Gustave Flaubert's *Sentimental Education* fourteen times in order to fully grasp it; he had memorized whole sections of it. Franz Kafka said it was one of his favorite novels. Not bad for a book that was widely criticized for its heartlessness and cynicism when it was published.

People speak glibly about Flaubert's style. I've noticed that the best way to get people to talk about your "style" is to talk about it yourself. That's what Flaubert did, and Truman Capote as well. Flaubert's correspondence attested to his hours spent on his couch, his "marinade," searching for *le mot juste*; he would write just a few paragraphs a day.

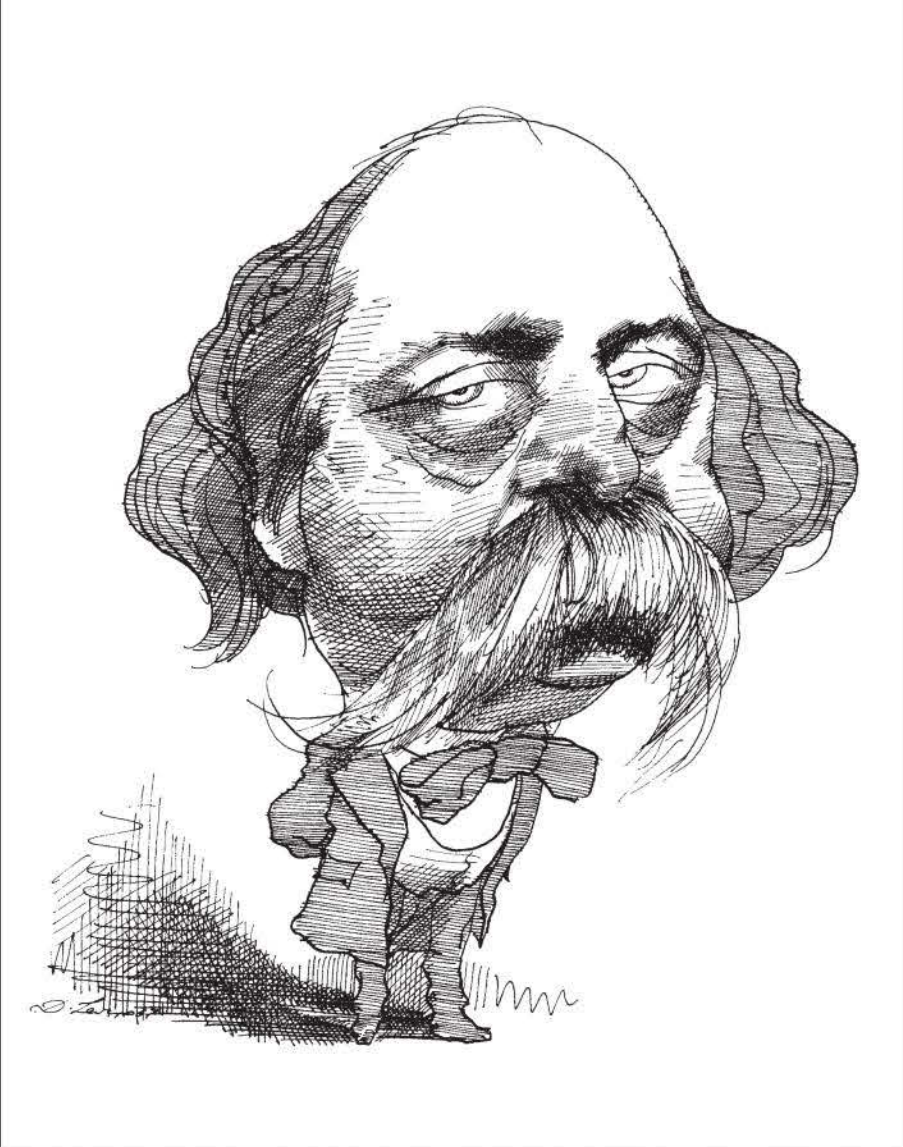
What are the earmarks of Flaubert's style in *Sentimental Education*, the subject of Peter Brooks's *Flaubert in the Ruins of Paris*? Short sentences and mostly short scenes, more actual dialogue than in the earlier *Madame Bovary*, but most of the dialogue summarized in free indirect discourse, which has none of the intimacy of actual, stuttered, circular, self-serving talk but makes the scenes move along at a clip. The descriptions (unlike Nabokov's, say) never draw attention to themselves but are an exquisite assemblage of closely observed, muted details, as in this one of the novel's main character, Frédéric Moreau, dining with Madame Arnoux, the married woman with whom he is in love:

He scarcely uttered a word during these dinners; he gazed at her. On her right temple she had a little beauty-spot; her bandeaux were darker than the rest of her hair, and always seemed a little moist at the edges; she stroked them occasionally, with two fingers. He knew the shape of each of her nails; he loved listening to the rustle of her silk dress when she passed a door; he secretly sniffed at the scent on her handkerchief; her comb, her gloves, her rings were things of real significance to him, as important as works of art, endowed with life almost human; they all possessed his heart and fed his passion.

Few of Frédéric's thoughts are given, but when they are, they are often of a sudden romantic élan, a shiver of the old romantic agony, almost immediately neutralized by a mundane detail or cynical thought. Thus when his old friend Deslauriers wants to meet his beloved Madame Arnoux, Frédéric thinks he would gladly risk his life for his friend, but then he is worried that Deslaurier's shabby "black coat, his attorney-like behavior, and his extravagant remarks, might annoy Madame Arnoux, compromise him and lower him in her estimation."

Frédéric nurses romantic impulses, but he doesn't have the genius to lend them substance or to pursue them. He feels that Madame Arnoux's husband

Gustave Flaubert



Jacques is a "kindly, intelligent man," but a moment later, when Jacques insultingly chucks Frédéric under the chin, the younger man immediately demotes him in his mind—and his wife as well. The essence of romanticism is that every serious passion is forever; lovers take vows for all "eternity." But the essence of realism is that emotions contract and expand and drift second by second. In Flaubert's world, ambitions and passions are unstable:

He asked himself in all seriousness whether he was to be a great painter or a great poet; and he decided in favour of painting, for the demands of this profession would bring him closer to Madame Arnoux. So he had found his vocation! The object of his existence was now clear, and there could be no doubt about the future.

Flaubert's descriptions are rarely flashy, but they reveal carefully pondered, almost scientific observations. "Science" was a fundamental word in his aesthetic vocabulary. He complained to his best friend, the writer George Sand, that his contemporaries were insufficiently devoted to "science," by which he meant economics, history, and politics. Even political sentiments are very unstable in Flaubert's world. At one point in *Sentimental Education* a professor who has challenged those in power is extremely popular with the mob. Yet when a moment later he takes a position contrary to popular sentiment, he is instantly despised. "He was hated now, for he

represented authority." These mercurial sentiments are true both intimately and as social phenomena.

Flaubert took years to write *Sentimental Education*. He was an ardent researcher who applied to his new book the methods he had previously employed in preparing *Salammbô*, set in Carthage in the third century BC. He retraced the walk Frédéric and the courtesan Rosanette take through the forest of Fontainebleau almost minute by minute, researched the manufacture of porcelain (one of Arnoux's businesses), plotted out the various combats in the streets of Paris during the 1848 insurrection, and studied the stock market and female fashions year by year.

Of course there are the more familiar stylistic elements in Flaubert's writing. Words are not to be repeated in close proximity. One scene must grow seamlessly out of the preceding one, the famous *progression d'effet*. The beginning of chapter 19 is the single sudden rupture of this rule:

He travelled the world.

He tasted the melancholy of packet ships, the chill of waking under canvas, the boredom of landscapes and monuments, the bitterness of broken friendship.

He returned home.

He went into society, and he had affairs with other women. They were insipid beside the endless memory of his first love. And then the vehemence of desire, the keen edge of sensation itself, had left him. His intellectual ambitions were fading too. The years went

by; and he resigned himself to the stagnation of his mind and the apathy that lived in his heart.

Although this is a celebrated passage, it's not really characteristic because it groups sustained emotions over long periods. Flaubert is both a romantic and a realist, but realism, with all its subversions of the grandiose, usually prevails.

Another feature of the style of the novel is its many topical references to political events and crises and to artistic and political figures who had been quickly forgotten. It is a strange practice, requiring footnotes even for the French reader. It goes to prove that Flaubert's ideal reader really was a contemporary. He said that he was writing "the moral history of the men of my generation."

This is the starting point of *Flaubert in the Ruins of Paris*. After twenty years of being the richest and most powerful world capital, Paris was in ruins. In 1871 the French had been defeated in the Franco-Prussian War and the emperor Napoleon III had been deposed. The Commune of Paris was furiously battling the forces of the French government headquartered at Versailles. While the fighting continued, Flaubert was in constant touch by post with Sand; seventeen years older than Flaubert, she was a socialist of long standing while he had long been staunchly conservative.

When the fighting stopped (and after the Communards had destroyed the Tuileries Palace, the Hôtel de Ville, and many other government structures), Flaubert visited the ruins with Maxime Du Camp, a close friend with whom he had traveled through the Near East between 1849 and 1851. Tourists were already visiting the ruins, which many people admired more than the buildings that had once stood there. Everything was carefully recorded by photographers. Du Camp later recalled:

As we were looking at the blackened carcass of the Tuileries, of the Treasury, of the Palace of the Legion of Honor and I was exclaiming on it, he said to me: "If they had understood *L'Education Sentimentale*, none of this would have happened."

The claim was, in one sense, absurdly arrogant. The far-left Communards were not likely to read difficult fiction by a writer who was anything but *engagé*. After eighteen months, much of the novel's first printing of three thousand copies was still unsold. Whereas a censorship trial had assured the success of *Madame Bovary*, no such scandal publicized *Sentimental Education*.

Then what could Flaubert have meant? As Edmund Wilson once noted, he "seems always to see humanity in social terms and historical perspective." Ever since the French Revolution, writers and "intellectuals" (a word not yet invented) viewed themselves as participants in history. Before the Revolution, society had changed at a geological pace; after

the Revolution there were constant changes in the French government: Napoleon I, the Restoration of the Bourbons in 1814, the July Revolution of 1830 that overthrew Charles X, and the ascent of the “bourgeois king” Louis-Philippe, who ruled until 1848. Then a new republic was declared, with Napoleon’s nephew Louis-Napoleon elected “prince-president.” In a coup d’état four years later he declared himself Emperor Napoleon III and ruled for eighteen years.

What did it mean to be an actor in history? For one thing, it meant that a Parisian such as Frédéric (or Flaubert, who had been born in 1821) could trace his emotional development in parallel to the shifts in national history, just as an American of my age (born in 1940) came of age in the bland 1950s, felt that human nature was changing forever in the exciting 1960s, no longer believed in “human nature” in the 1970s, became cynically materialistic in the 1980s, and so on. I doubt that even Flaubert would claim that his protagonist’s “sentimental education” was in lockstep with the zeitgeist, but he could justifiably argue that Frédéric could not have remained indifferent to coming of age during the reign of Louis-Philippe or living through the revolution of 1848 and the creation of the Second Republic—the period of the major events of the novel, which begins in 1840, when Frédéric is eighteen.

Brooks, who has written extensively about France as well as the mechanics of the novel, here combines the two, as he did in *Henry James Goes to Paris* (2007). As he points out in his subtle, wonderfully informed book, in *Sentimental Education* there is “no morally

sensitive protagonist in the manner of Henry James’s Lambert Strether or Maggie Verver. That role is passed on to the reader, who must ultimately draw the lessons from the colossal failure of a generation unequal to its rendezvous with history.”

Brooks also draws our attention to the fact that the historical novel, as invented by Walter Scott, took place in the distant medieval past. By contrast, in Stendhal’s *The Charterhouse of Parma*, Fabrice del Dongo fights at Waterloo. Referring to Stendhal’s *The Red and the Black*, Brooks writes: “As Stendhal’s narrator explicitly tells us, politics has become the context of everyday life in a country excruciatingly aware of an underlying class warfare.” Sound familiar?

Brooks argues that the factual historical novel set in the recent (as opposed to the mythic) past is “to represent, by means of an invented action, the true state of humanity in a past and historical epoch.” If that epoch is fairly recent, an autopsy might reveal how we got to where we are now. *Gravity’s Rainbow*, by looking at corporations profiting from both sides of World War II, might tell us something about the effect of international business on politics today (Paul Manafort springs to mind). *One Hundred Years of Solitude* shows us how a people can almost instantly forget a troubling episode (the United Fruit Company’s violence in South America or our war in Vietnam).

This new historical fiction often illustrates the lives of minor characters in the past, so Brooks claims: “The

historical novel is not supposed to be merely costume drama or historical flight of fancy. It is meant to get at a kind of truth of everyday life—customs and ways of being—that political histories tend to scant.” In other words, it has the same mission as the *Annales* historians.

Whereas *Gone With the Wind*, say, puts modern characters—with contemporary feelings and ambitions—into historical drag, a true historical novel, such as Penelope Fitzgerald’s *The Blue Flower*, manages a kind of archaeology of the sentiments. We discover entirely different ideas about religion (pervasive, Lutheran) and the marriageable age for girls (twelve). The end-of-the-year family confession of sins and the hesitation of a poor aristocrat to marry a rich bourgeois girl—this is all strange to us and true to the period in which it is set, nearly two hundred years before it was written. Fitzgerald’s Russian novel, *The Beginning of Spring*, takes place in 1913 but was written in the 1980s. Once again with admirable authenticity she rendered class relations, the emotions of a dour Tolstoyan, the hospitality of a rich merchant with his array of liqueurs, and so on.

But Flaubert was trying something more difficult. Brooks argues that he wanted to portray the lives of ordinary people, not the renowned. And he adds:

I have suggested that the “realist” novel of the nineteenth century comes about when Balzac shortens the distance between the represented historical moment and the moment of writing—reduces it to some ten or twenty years, looking back from the 1830s and 1840s to the 1820s, so that he is writing about near-contemporary society, attempting to see it in the same totality as the earlier periods represented in the historical novel.

Today many people seem to be disdainful of historical novels, as if they were all costume dramas or invitations to sentimental nostalgia. Perhaps history has sped up so much that there is nothing to learn about where we are now from even the recent past. What can the Beatles and the King assassination tell us about Trump and *Avatar*? Maybe we prefer to slip into the distant past, an alternative universe that has the advantage at least of not being ours. Maybe that’s why we like the works of

Penelope Fitzgerald and Beryl Bainbridge so much.

Flaubert in the Ruins of Paris covers not only the political events of the time but also Flaubert’s tender relationship with George Sand. They had a rich correspondence, which was adapted for the stage by Irene Worth and Peter Eyre twenty years ago. Sand admired Flaubert and wrote one of the few favorable reviews of *Sentimental Education*, though privately she reproached him for being so unfeeling and ironic with his hero. I’ve noticed that it’s not uncommon for writers to invent characters with ten points fewer of IQ but otherwise based on themselves, characters they proceed to torture for three hundred pages.

Flaubert loved Sand, who combined masculine and feminine qualities; he called her Chère Maître. She wanted him to get married, but he dismissed her “fantastic” suggestion, saying, “There is an ecclesiastical side of me that people don’t know.” He thought of himself as a monk in the service of art.


To please her and to prove that he was a better person than most people thought, he wrote for her his story “A Simple Heart” (Sand died before he finished it). In it a pious, uneducated servant woman, who can picture the Father and the Son but not the Holy Ghost, shifts her affections over the years from the family she works for to a sailor-nephew to the parrot that her employer gives her—and finally, after the parrot dies, to the stuffed parrot itself. When the servant is dying, she sees the gates of heaven opening to reveal the Holy Ghost: her stuffed parrot.

This is the perfect example of *progression d’effet*, in the way that love, by gradually shifting from one object to another, makes us weep over what sounds like a bad joke: an old lady confuses her parrot with the Holy Ghost. That transformation is, in a sense, the work of the story, just as we could say that the work of *Lolita* is to turn the story of a scheming pedophile and the girl he exploits into one of the great heartbreaking novels about love, in a direct line of descent from *The Princess of Clèves* to *Adolphe* to *Anna Karenina*. Brooks quite properly observes that far from being the ironic tale of a batty old peasant, “A Simple Heart” is a feeling testament to human goodness—the perfect memorial to Sand. □

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EXSANGUINATION

Life as it unspools
ever more eludes
examination.

We wonder what is best—
exsanguination in a rush,
or in 1,000 small slashes.

—Joyce Carol Oates

The Sounds of Silence

Jerome Groopman

The Language of Light: A History of Silent Voices

by Gerald Shea.
Yale University Press,
266 pp., \$26.00

Several years ago, I noticed difficulty hearing; testing showed diminished perception of high frequencies, a common consequence of aging. Hearing aids were prescribed, which helped to amplify sounds but weren't a complete remedy. Background noise in restaurants made it difficult to discern the conversation of dinner partners, and I often missed muttered dialogue in movies. Most vexing was what Oliver Sacks termed "mishearing"¹—I thought I heard certain words, but they were distortions of what was actually said, and my response corresponded to the distortions. For example, recently a scientific colleague told me he was going to a conference in Milan. I heard "Iran," and replied that he was sure to be hassled at US Customs given Trump's travel ban. He looked confused. "Since when is Italy on the list?"

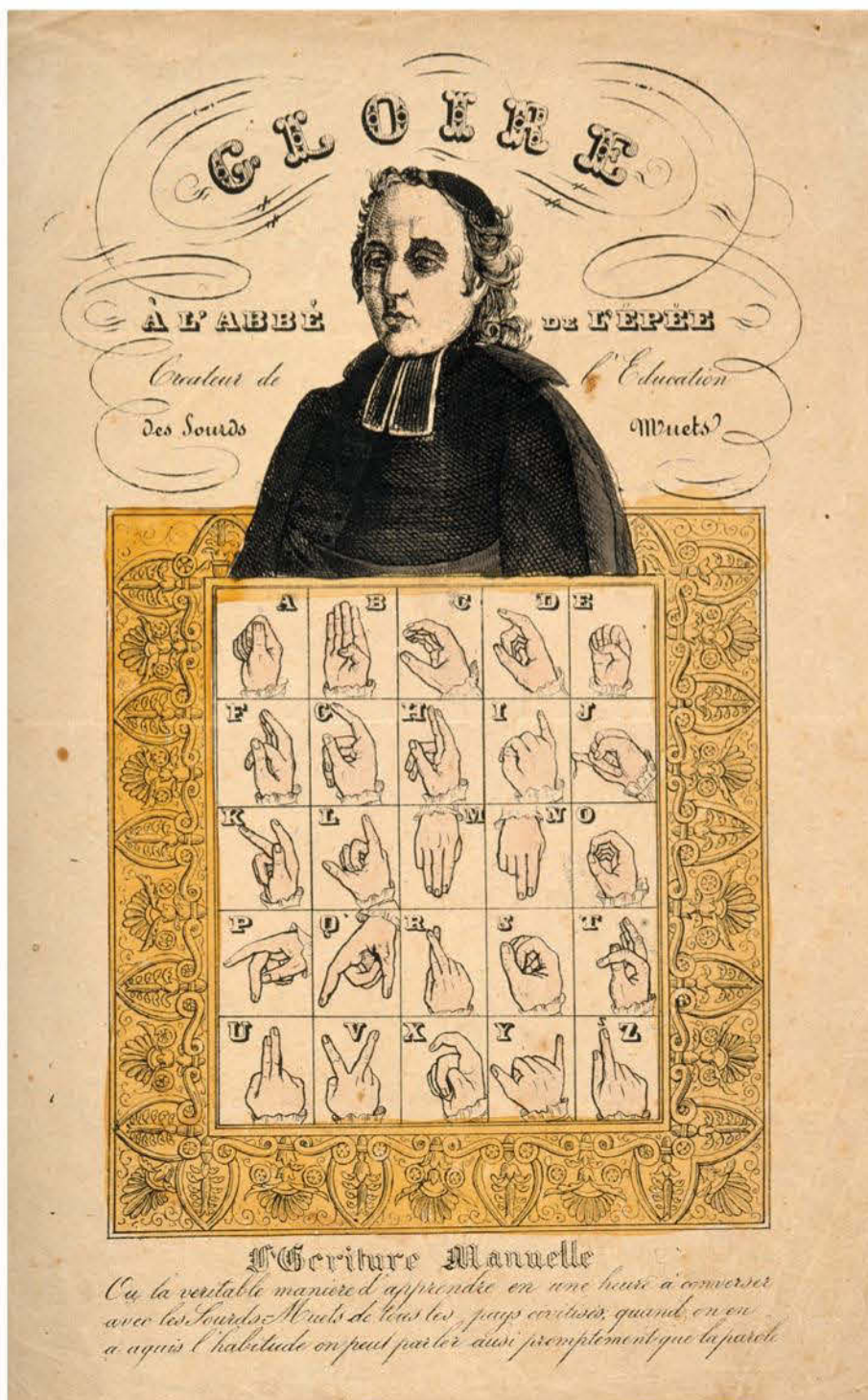
Gerald Shea has confronted such difficulties, but in his case they have been more severe ones and present for most of his life. At the age of six, he developed scarlet fever that caused partial hearing loss. In his captivating memoir *Song Without Words* (2013), he describes how "most consonants and some vowels... faded to softness," lowering "an invisible curtain creating a quieter world" that isolated him within it. His great challenge was to learn how to decipher what he terms his "lyricals," the misheard words. For example, he heard "what'll happen after Nora leaves" as "water happens after coral reefs." Such transformations "stir the imagination with nonexistent places and people, like the *Doubtful Asphodels* not found on any library shelves of Nabokov's prose."

Shea devised an inner lexicon to decipher such transformations, and was able to attend Phillips Academy (Andover), Yale College, and Columbia Law School, ultimately carving out a career as an international lawyer in the US and France. It was only when he was in his thirties that his partial deafness was diagnosed. Shea wears hearing aids now, but he still struggles to consistently understand speech. While his lyricals may stir his imagination, he does not romanticize them: "in the commerce of necessity they can be a hellish experience. They make of our lives a constant unscrambling of language, punctuated by masquerades of understanding."

His impaired hearing and struggle to comprehend speech prompted Shea in his new book, *The Language of Light*, to explore how those with no hearing from birth, whom he terms "Deaf," express themselves:

I have no fluent understanding of the languages of the Deaf, but the grace and visual clarity of those who communicate in signed languages, which I call...the language of light, are to me a wonder,

¹Oliver Sacks, "Mishearings," *The New York Times*, June 5, 2015.



The Abbé de l'Épée, who founded a school for the deaf in Paris in 1755 and was the first to recognize that they could be taught with sign language

and I feel a close affinity to it and to them. Theirs is not an unplanned but a natural, visual poetry, at once both the speech and the music of the Deaf. Though I live in the realm of the hearing, a part of my life, in the form of my search for communicative grace and clarity, is quartered in my understanding of the world of the Deaf, and I feel as if a part of it.

The Language of Light is an eloquent and engaging history of centuries of battle between the "natural, visual poetry" of signing and "oralism," by which the deaf are coerced to mouth words. As with many sustained conflicts, this one has its roots in economics, religion, and xenophobia. The Justinian Code of the Byzantine era denied rights to those unable to hear and speak. In order to inherit, offspring had to be able to speak, so aristocratic families across Europe with deaf children sought to secure their wealth by finding oralist teachers who could instruct them in lip-reading and articulating words. Shea explains that lip-reading

allows the deaf to decipher only the simplest words and makes understanding complex concepts painstaking, if not impossible.

But forcing the deaf to utter words was pursued not only for monetary reasons among the rich, but also out of a perverted interpretation of John 1:1: "In the beginning was the Word... and the Word was made flesh." Guillaume Durand de Mende, a thirteenth-century bishop, thought the deaf were "refusing" to hear the word of God, and, as mutes, were "unwilling" to speak it. Shea writes:

Christ himself was at the beginning of the creation a Word—who was *with* God, and *was* God, and was *later* made flesh, and dwelt among us... What then was a man or woman who couldn't speak, understand, or even perceive the Word—the Bible, the gospels, Christ himself? Who was this individual who lacked the critical human characteristic that distinguished other men and women, made wholly in God's image, from animals?

There is an explicit biblical imperative to protect the deaf that Shea overlooks in his history. Leviticus 19:14 instructs the faithful not to "insult (*tekallel*) the deaf or place a stumbling block before the blind." The Hebrew Bible is acutely aware of the cruel impulses in human character that can lead individuals to denigrate and abuse the disabled.² There is a shared sensitivity found in Islam, drawing on the hadith—"cursed is he who misleads a blind person away from his path"; it is forbidden to ridicule or maltreat the afflicted.³

Perhaps it was the supersessionist theology, superseding or replacing prior religious doctrine, of the medieval church that led it to ignore Leviticus and overlay a malicious reading of the gospel. Since speech was the expression of the soul and the manifestation of divine thought, a man or a woman who couldn't speak, understand, or perceive the word of God was cast as not fully human. As Shea writes, "Following Christ's example, depicted in the prayer book of Saint Hildegard, the priest must, as Shea writes, 'open the mouth of the Deaf.'"

Typically, the deaf were subjected to brutal "treatments" to force spoken language. These "amounted to trials by ordeal, yielding considerable suffering, illness, and sometimes death." Hot coals were forced into the mouths of the deaf to trigger speech "by the force of the burning." Other tortures, which continued into the eighteenth century, included inserting catheters through the nostrils, twisting them through the nasal cavity and into the Eustachian tubes and injecting burning liquids; drilling holes into the skull so as to allow the deaf to "hear" through the openings (trepanation); flooding ether into the auditory canal; applying blistering agents to the neck, scorching it from nape to the chin with a hot cylinder full of supposedly magical burning leaves; applying adhesive cotton and setting it on fire; using vomitories and purgative agents; and injecting hot needles into or removing the mastoid bones. The premise was that drilling, cutting, fracturing, scorching, or poisoning would "open up" the ear and the brain to sounds.

Yet not everyone in the church was heartless or delusional when it came to the deaf. It was a priest, Charles-Michel de l'Épée, who recognized that spoken and written words had no intrinsic connection to the ideas they represented. To teach the New Testament to twin sisters who were deaf, he had to use their native language of signing. In 1755, l'Épée tested the notion that seeing could be substituted for hearing in learning concepts. His discovery

²For a scholarly examination of this sensitivity to the vulnerable in the Hebrew Bible, see Shai Held, *The Heart of Torah* (Jewish Publication Society, 2017), Vol. 1, p. xxiv, and Vol. 2, pp. 57–60.

³The hadiths and Koranic sources of Islamic concern for the disabled are reviewed at theislamicworkplace.com/disability-and-islam/.

was “as revolutionary as the work of Copernicus,” Shea writes, since signed languages would be the central sun for the Deaf, “illuminating both a path to the written tongue of the hearing and the way of the hearing to the minds of the Deaf.” The school l’Épée founded became known as Saint Jacques for its location in the narrow Parisian rue Saint-Jacques, behind what would become the Pantheon, and it serves as a sort of shrine to what Shea calls “the golden age” of deaf education.

Among the luminaries at Saint Jacques was Roch-Ambroise Auguste Bébien. Born in Guadeloupe in 1789, Bébien possessed excellent hearing but, as a student in Paris, gravitated to Saint Jacques, where his godfather, the Abbé Sicard, was an administrator. During vacations, Bébien attended classes and workshops with the deaf students and became fluent in French sign language. He ultimately was given a certificate by the school as “an *honorary* Deaf man.” Bébien is a hero of Shea’s book, the hearing teacher who emancipated the deaf and, according to Bébien’s biographer Fabrice Bertin, sparked “the development of their consciousness of themselves as speakers of a complete language” by changing the paradigm of their learning. In 1826, he wrote:

We know that the deaf have a language one doesn’t teach them, although with art and exercise one can offer it the happiest development. It is in a way the reflection of their sensations, the relief of their impressions. We carry the same timeless and limitless principle within all of us: that of the first language of any human being, which gives immediate expression to his thought and is not a translation of any other language, but expresses his intimate connection with ideas.... The thought, born in the brain, bursts forth like a flame sparkling in crystal.

Bébien elaborated that the education of the deaf should begin with the thought, not the written word. For example, he might point to a picture of a saber in a book and then move his dominant hand across his waist to shoulder height, as if drawing the weapon. His student would mimic the motion. “The sign follows the thought, step by step,” Bébien wrote, “like a shadow assuming all of its shapes.” Next, the student is given the written word “saber” and, Shea affirms, “before long, would understand that this written word and others were a kind of conventional drawing of the idea first expressed in sign language.”

Bébien’s methods spread to the United States in the early nineteenth century. The American School for the Deaf was founded in Hartford in 1817, and by the mid-nineteenth century, twenty-six such schools existed in America, all with signing as the language of instruction. Yet this flourishing of signing proved to be short-lived. Oralists struck back by deliberately suppressing it as a method of teaching. The movements of the hands and body were characterized as “primitive gestures” of “primitive people.” By the latter part of the nineteenth century, most teachers of the deaf were ignorant of signing and thus had a vested financial interest in forcing speech.

As part of the 1878 World’s Fair in Paris, the Ministry of Education organized a congress on “the improvement of the condition of the deaf” and showcased technological advances that required hearing: Alexander Graham Bell’s telephone and Thomas Edison’s phonograph. A resolution was adopted that sign language was “auxiliary,” and that the first means of communication should be lip-reading and vocalization so as “to restore the deaf more fully to society.” Two years after the Paris World’s Fair, the Congress of Milan was convened, which “would prove to be the seminal traumatic event in the modern history of the Deaf.” A scriptural reminder was given “to the assembled group, many of whom were religious

race and proposed reducing their numbers by breeding them out of existence. He associated deafness with other “abnormalities” like dwarfism, polydactyly, and sexual deformities. Since sign language caused the deaf to associate with one another and promoted relationships that led to marriage and offspring, Bell vigorously opposed education that “propagat[ed] their physical defect” and supported oralism with segregation of the students. At the dawn of the modern scientific era, the theology of the church was replaced by the catechism of eugenics.

Bell was more than simply a scientist of sound with rigid pedagogical views; he was also an adept marketer who used Helen Keller as a poster

University⁴; the vast majority are “mainstreamed,” educated with the assistance of classroom interpreters who use manually coded systems. This oralist approach is now being justified with a technological advance: the cochlear implant. Currently, about 80 percent of the children born deaf in the West are implanted with the devices. Hearing professionals believe that implanted children cannot be taught orally while learning sign language—that they’re mutually exclusive.

As opposed to hearing aids that amplify sound, the implants send electronic signals directly to the auditory nerve. Assessment of the efficacy of the devices is generally done within a laboratory setting, using a set number and type of test words. Annual sales of cochlear implants exceed \$5 billion, and as of 2013, more than 300,000 people worldwide have received them; in the United States, this roughly amounts to 58,000 adults and 38,000 children. It seems the greatest benefit is for those who originally could hear and then lost the ability, rather than people who were born deaf. Proponents of the implants predict that within a generation, they will result in the extinction of an alternative culture of the deaf. Shea writes that the deaf community was caught off guard by the introduction of the implants, and generally has reacted with skepticism and fear.

Since less than 0.25 percent of the American population can communicate with sign language, Shea acknowledges the understandable desire of parents to give their deaf children sufficient hearing to function in the larger world. But he cautions that the benefits of cochlear implants are measured in a laboratory setting and fall far short outside of it. A study in the United Kingdom found that children with the implants were no more educationally advanced than deaf children with hearing aids. Further research at the University of Toronto supported this observation, as daily spoken language was not better comprehended by children with cochlear implants than by comparable children with standard hearing aids. As with hearing aids, background noise in environments like classrooms greatly impairs understanding.

Thus, the real world of daily communication is still a struggle despite the device. In France, only a minority of children with an implant develop intelligible speech. Tellingly, as children with implants age, they often turn to sign language, because it is exhausting to strain to hear with the device, while they can fluently communicate ideas and feelings with their hands and gestures. Without a significant leap in technology, the deaf will continue to seek comprehensibility and fluency in signing.

Shea rightly concludes that to deprive an individual of language is to appropriate his or her identity. As an extension, his culture is diminished and his social relations blunted. It seems fitting that after centuries of denigration by clergy and scientists, the deaf flourish with a language of light. Light: a divine act on the first day of creation, which when diffracted, bends around obstacles to reveal its exquisite inner diversity that we know as colors. □

⁴For more on the founding of Gallaudet University, see Edna Edith Sayers, *The Life and Times of T. H. Gallaudet* (ForeEdge, 2017).



Hieronymus Bosch: The Cure of Folly, circa 1501–1505

teachers of the Deaf, that brought everyone full circle back to the Middle Ages: the true ‘mission’ of the congress was to fulfill the gospel of Saint John: *in principio erat verbum*—in the beginning was the Word.

The Milan gathering entrenched oralism as the sole method of instruction for the deaf on the European continent. (In one school in France, students were forced to follow a diet of stale bread as a punishment if they communicated in sign language in class.) Those pupils who could not learn to articulate or lip-read were classified as “idiots” or “semi-idiot.”

As science and technology advanced in the nineteenth century, a new dogma took hold: eugenics, the belief that society should select those most fit intellectually and physically, and weed out inferiors, particularly those with disabilities. Prominent among its advocates was Alexander Graham Bell. Bell’s relationship to hearing, beyond his inventions, involved his mother, who used an ear trumpet but was able to play and teach piano, and his wife, Mabel, who had diminished hearing but could still hear a church bell.

He wrote an essay about what he called the “deaf variety” of the human

child for oralism. He trotted Keller out at various conventions to speak, asserting that if she could reach such a high level of discourse, any deaf person could. When *The Story of My Life* was published in 1903, Keller dedicated it to “Alexander Graham Bell, Who has taught the deaf to speak.” In fact, Keller’s speech was largely incomprehensible, except to her tutor, Anne Sullivan, and others who knew her well. Shea convincingly shows that some of Keller’s fame was fostered by the self-serving Sullivan, and he questions whether Keller’s celebrated work was her own.

The most damning evidence in *The Language of Light* dates to November 1891, when Sullivan forwarded a story, “The Frost King,” to a publisher, claiming it was Keller’s. At the time, she was eleven years old and had been blind and deaf since the age of nineteen months. Her acute and vivid descriptions of sound and light defy credulity. Indeed, Shea shows that Sullivan had plagiarized almost 80 percent of the 1,500-word story, virtually verbatim, from a publication that was out of print.

The oralists have largely triumphed. Only a minority of deaf students are educated in American Sign Language, at institutions like Gallaudet

Museo del Prado, Madrid/Bridgeman Images

All the World's a Stage

Larry Wolff

The Politics of Opera: A History from Monteverdi to Mozart

by Mitchell Cohen.
Princeton University Press,
477 pp., \$39.95

Machiavelli's *The Prince* was presented to the Medici family in 1513 with a dedication that turned out to be much more than a flattering formality since, for the next five centuries, it remained attached to the most influential treatise of modern political theory. Machiavelli began by observing that "those who strive to obtain the good graces of a prince are accustomed to come before him with such things as they hold most precious"—horses, arms, jewels—but he offered instead his thoughts on the conduct of princes. By the end of the sixteenth century poets and musicians would be offering the Medici something new, unprecedented, and precious: opera. Machiavelli, in dedicating *The Prince*, affected modesty: "I have not embellished with swelling or magnificent words, nor stuffed with rounded periods, nor with any extrinsic allurements or adornments." He claimed to value truth over ornament—but opera would become the most magnificently embellished of cultural products, lavishly expensive to produce and sensually dazzling to the eye and ear, as it remains to this day.

Mitchell Cohen's *The Politics of Opera: A History from Monteverdi to Mozart* has boldly placed Machiavelli and early modern political theory at the center of the early history of opera, reflecting creatively on the ways in which the reverberations of the great Florentine realist reached even into the musical realm. For just as *The Prince* was presented as a precious gift precisely because it described and prescribed the conduct of princes, so the operas of the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries placed princes on the stage and let them sing their political circumstances.

Cohen focuses on Monteverdi's Orfeo, one of the founding figures of the operatic form in 1607, singing his plea for Eurydice in the underworld kingdom of Pluto, and also on Monteverdi's Nero, an emperor of extreme notoriety, working together with his scheming soulmate and eventual empress in *The Coronation of Poppea* (1642–1643). Monteverdi achieved an almost perfectly Machiavellian opera with *The Coronation of Poppea*, inasmuch as the two villains, Nero and Poppea, triumph without a moment of self-doubt and, after eliminating dissidents and rivals—including the philosopher Seneca—sing a rapturously beautiful love duet as they gaze upon one another in consummate mutual infatuation. Interestingly, the most important part of princely character, which Machiavelli called *virtù*—meaning not moral virtue but something closer to virile prowess (colloquially, perhaps, "balls")—belongs not to the masculine basso register of Seneca but rather to the soprano register of a castrato, who sings the unscrupulous Nero.

Anyone familiar with the works of Verdi—which lie outside the scope of



A scene from the Handspring Puppet Company's production of Monteverdi's *The Return of Ulysses*, directed by William Kentridge

Cohen's book—would immediately be able to point to his musical gallery of Machiavellian princes who use, abuse, and consolidate power, like the Duke of Mantua in *Rigoletto* (set in the century of Machiavelli and the city of *Orfeo's* premiere) or Philip II, the autocratic sovereign of Spain, in Verdi's *Don Carlo*. There is perhaps nothing as chilling in opera as the scene that Verdi created for two basses, King Philip and the Grand Inquisitor, as they trade lines at the bottom of the bass clef: the king asks whether it would be acceptable for him to put his own son to death for reasons of state, and the inquisitor lowers the tessitura but raises the Machiavellian ante by demanding further that the king sacrifice Rodrigo, his closest confidant. The heartlessness of the sixteenth-century Habsburg king was a theme that was close to Verdi's nationalist heart, since the nineteenth-century Habsburg emperor Franz Joseph I was an enemy of Italian unification.

Cohen proposes an immensely valuable extension to opera of the Cambridge School of political thought (associated with Quentin Skinner since the 1970s), by treating operatic compositions partly as political texts that are produced by and participate in contemporary political debates. The discussion of Machiavelli in relation to Monteverdi is particularly successful, though it could be further extended

with reference to one of the most celebrated works of the Cambridge School, J.G.A. Pocock's *The Machiavellian Moment* (1975), which explores the broad European circulation of Machiavellian ideas, even as far as England.

Pocock did not consider the relevance of Handel to the Machiavellian moment, and neither does Cohen, but the great German composer, who relocated from Italy to England in 1712, intensely pursued Machiavellian political themes over the course of decades in both operas and oratorios that feature spectacular arias of unscrupulous conquest, brutality, and duplicity as well as virtuous political dedication, honor, and glory. If ever there was a Machiavellian operatic moment, it was in Handel's London in the 1720s, with Caesar's conquest of Egypt in *Giulio Cesare*, the usurpation of Bertarido's Lombard throne by Grimoaldo in *Rodelinda*, and Tamerlane's triumph over the Ottoman Sultan Bayezet in *Tamerlano*. Handel would later, in the oratorios, go on to dissect the virtues and vices of Old Testament leaders and kings such as Jephthah, who is supposed to sacrifice his daughter; Saul, who schemes to murder David; and Solomon, the model of princely wisdom. Saul orders Jonathan to destroy David in basso recitative, and Saul's daughter Merab then evaluates the conduct of the prince in a brilliant soprano aria:

*Capricious man, in humour lost,
By ev'ry wind of passion toss'd!
Now sets his vassal on the throne,
Then low as earth he casts him
down!*

In *Solomon* it is Zadok the priest, a tenor, who points the political moral: Solomon the king of peace can build the temple in Jerusalem that David the warrior could not achieve:

*Our pious David wish'd in vain,
By this great act to bless his reign;
But Heav'n the monarch's hopes
withstood,
For ah! his hands were stain'd
with blood.*

Cohen's *Politics of Opera* follows a selective path through the early modern history of opera, jumping from the Italian Renaissance of Monteverdi to the French tradition of Lully and Rameau, analyzed in relation to the absolute monarchy of the Bourbons and the emerging political criticism of the Enlightenment. The concluding section of the book considers Mozart and Habsburg political ideology in eighteenth-century Vienna.

Cohen's approach to baroque opera will seem blunt to some: he interprets the emergence of musical monody—the dominance of a solo voice and single melody that displaced the multiple voices of Renaissance polyphony—as parallel to the development of the centralized princely state:

Consider this irony. The assertion of monody, that crucial ingredient in the first operatic experiments, paralleled, as we have seen, the development of centralizing authority in an age of rising or consolidating princedoms. Politics and music asserted a single rule (respectively).

Historians have often found it more fruitful to think of the politics of art and entertainment in relation to the rituals of the court rather than the mechanics of the state. Peter Burke's classic study *The Fabrication of Louis XIV* (1992) was fundamental for thinking about the politics of the arts; while Georgia Cowart's *Triumph of Pleasure: Louis XIV and the Politics of Spectacle* (2008) explored both opera and ballet; and Jennifer Homans's *Apollo's Angels* (2010) laid out the political dimensions of dance at the court of the Sun King. Cohen traces the politics of opera from Lully in the age of Louis XIV to Rameau in the age of Louis XV, and is particularly interested in the writings of Jean-Jacques Rousseau, probably the most important political theorist of the Enlightenment and, at the same time, a passionate music critic and a moderately talented composer with one successful short opera to his name, *Le devin du Village* (The Village Soothsayer).

First performed for the French court in 1752, Rousseau's opera was a celebration of peasant life and love, and two years later the uncourtly Rousseau would inaugurate a new philosophical age with his stunningly influential *Discourse on the Origin of Inequality*. The essay is an anthropological

thought experiment in which Rousseau imagines his way back into the “state of nature”—an earlier stage of human existence when men (not women, to be sure) were naturally equal and then, fatefully, succumbed to inequality. Cohen makes the connection to the anthropological tour of the “Indies” in Rameau’s *Les Indes galantes*, his opera-ballet about love in Turkey, Persia, and Peru, and offers an odd flow chart to diagram the parts of the opera.

Les Indes galantes was composed in 1735, but was such a success that it was still being staged when Rousseau wrote his essay on inequality in 1754, and both may be seen as belonging to the same anthropological impulse at the heart of the Enlightenment. Opera was capable of deploying remote cultures in order to pose questions of broad social and political significance, even when the circumstances of elite entertainment added an ironic accent to the presentation. For instance, in the Persian scenario of *Les Indes galantes*, two Persian men fall in love with two female slaves (the complication is that each falls in love with the other’s slave), and one couple ends up pursuing the romance in a disarmingly charming rococo duet on the circumstances of slavery. The soprano slave sings lightheartedly, almost flirtatiously:

*Peut-on aimer dans l’esclavage?
C’est en augmenter la rigueur.
[Can one love in slavery?
It increases the harshness.]*

And the tenor master replies with ingratiating reassurance:

*On doit aimer dans l’esclavage,
C’est en adoucir la rigueur.
[One must love in slavery,
It softens the harshness.]*

Then they harmonize their parts, reconciling musically these irreconcilable points of view. Serious political opposition to slavery would not emerge until later in the eighteenth century, but already in the 1730s opera, in the guise of romantic interplay and under the influence of the early Enlightenment, could pose questions about the deformation of the human sentiments under brutal social conditions. Rousseau, avid music lover that he was, would certainly have been familiar with this duet, which in all its loveliness echoes so disturbingly for us across the centuries.

We do not definitively know whether Mozart read Rousseau, but it is hard not to feel that, given Mozart’s all-consuming intellectual curiosity and Rousseau’s pervasive presence in eighteenth-century culture, the composer must have known the philosopher’s ideas, even if only by intellectual osmosis. Of course, Pierre Beaumarchais read Rousseau, and Beaumarchais’s *The Marriage of Figaro* was the inspiration for Mozart’s opera. Cohen notes the presence of François Fénelon’s *The Adventures of Telemachus* in Mozart’s life and library: Mozart at the age of fourteen recorded in a letter to his sister, “I am just now reading Telemachus.” The novel was already old by that time: first published in 1699 as an anonymous assault on the absolute government of Louis XIV, it gives an imaginary account of the education of the son of Ulysses. Fénelon, arch-

bishop of Cambrai, offered instruction on politics, including the recommendation of a limited monarchy tempered by patrician republicanism and respect for some individual rights. Cohen is thus able to use Fénelon to pivot from the culture of royal absolutism at Versailles in the late seventeenth century to the Viennese culture of enlightened absolutism in the age of Mozart in the late eighteenth century.

Discussing the political implications of Mozart’s *Marriage of Figaro*, Cohen emphasizes the theme of servants “calling the tune,” as in Figaro’s aria of defiance:

*Se vuol ballare, signor contino,
Il chitarrino le suonerò.
[If you want to dance, little count,
I’ll play my little guitar.]*

While for Beaumarchais, Figaro’s insubordination would have resonated with the writings of Rousseau on inequality, the background for Mozart’s opera was subtly different: the enlightened absolutism of Emperor Joseph II, who struck down the privileges of the nobles in order to affirm the absolute authority of the sovereign. Joseph’s revolutionary program of enlightenment, as enacted from above, included not only the partial emancipation of serfs but also religious toleration, state control of the church, the abolition of censorship, and even micromanaged burial reform—cloth sacks instead of wooden coffins, deposited outside the city center in collective graves. This was not only hugely controversial in its own time but leaves us today without a specific gravesite for revering Mozart.

While it is clear that Mozart relished Figaro’s taunting of Count Almaviva, and liked the idea of humbling the privileged nobility in Josephine Vienna—which he would have surely associated with his own struggle for independence from the patronage of the archbishop of Salzburg—any attempt to find a strong political point of view in Mozart’s operas is inevitably complicated by his marvelous affinity for multiple perspectives. Don Giovanni, for instance—a nobleman who recognizes no limitations on his doings and desires, and must be finally punished with fire and brimstone at the end of the opera, dragged down to hell by the statue of the man he has murdered—would seem to illustrate perfectly the perspective of Emperor Joseph on nobles who thought themselves above the law. According to Cohen, “Don Giovanni is the aristocracy’s unrepressed id siphoned through egotism.” Yet even as the opera seems to be clear on this political point about the aristocracy, Mozart’s music makes Don Giovanni so irresistibly attractive that we come back to it over and over again with life-affirming relish at his resistance to laws and limits—a spiritual response that runs entirely counter to the apparent political message.

In *The Marriage of Figaro*, though Count Almaviva appears as an oppressive figure, engaged in the bullying and sexual harassment of his servants—a Josephine exemplar of bad aristocracy—the noble class itself is endowed with the most moving musical sympathy in the figure of Countess Almaviva, the count’s distressed and neglected wife. For Mozart she represents the aristocracy with a musical glamour that engaged his genius in its fullest glory.

Mozart, who sought to earn his living

independently by using his own talent, surely resented the aristocratic privilege of birth, and tried to evade the sort of patronage position held by Joseph Haydn, who put on a uniform in the morning to receive his musical orders for the day from his master, the Esterházy prince. Yet Mozart’s life was full of appreciative aristocrats, and while he did not want to wear livery like Haydn, he wrote almost flirtatiously to the Baroness von Waldstätten in Vienna in 1782 about “the beautiful jacket that is tickling my heart so mercilessly, please let me know where it can be bought.... I simply must have such a jacket.” One week later he was writing to thank her for the jacket. Countesses and baronesses all played their part in Mozart’s



life, and it would be false to represent him as an enemy of the ancien régime in which he himself was so thoroughly embedded.

Cohen insightfully introduces the philosophy of Edmund Burke into his discussion of opera and political theory, and when thinking about Mozart’s countess, I have sometimes found myself rereading the passage in Burke’s *Reflections on the Revolution in France* in which he remembered his visit to Versailles in the 1770s and his glimpse of the young Marie Antoinette:

It is now sixteen or seventeen years since I saw the Queen of France, then the Dauphiness, at Versailles; and surely never lighted on this orb, which she hardly seemed to touch, a more delightful vision. I saw her just above the horizon, decorating and cheering the elevated sphere she just began to move in—glittering like the morning-star, full of life and splendor and joy. Oh! what a revolution! and what an heart must I have, to contemplate without emotion that elevation and that fall!

The passage builds to the famous lament of chivalry desecrated: “I thought ten thousand swords must have leaped from their scabbards to avenge even a look that threatened her with insult.” Burke was a generation older than Mozart and much more deeply embedded in the ancien régime that he evoked with such nostalgia. Yet Mozart, creating *The Marriage of Figaro* in 1786 in Josephine Vienna, three years before the fall of the Bastille and four years before Burke’s *Reflections*, already understood that his world was precarious, riven with tensions that he could barely resolve musically at the end of the opera as the characters step forward to sing to-

gether: “Ah, tutti contenti saremo così” (“We will all be content like this”).

Did Mozart really believe it? His musical attentions to Countess Almaviva suggest that he was already nostalgic for the world that she would soon lose, as Burke would be for the lost world of the young Marie Antoinette (who was almost exactly Mozart’s age). In one of Mozart’s longest and most stunning melodic lines, echoed by a plaintive oboe, the countess sings: “Dove sono i bei momenti di dolcezza e di piacer?” (“Where have they gone, the beautiful moments of sweetness and pleasure?”). She is remembering her once-happy marriage, but the lyric equally suggests a broader nostalgia for the ancien régime that was already passing in Josephine Vienna and Mozartean Europe, a nostalgia so exquisite that it gives the lie to any simple association between Mozart and revolutionary class politics. After losing her vocal thread in her emotional turmoil, the countess, without help from the orchestra, must pick out of the air the single note, a C-natural, that will allow her to rediscover her melody and regain her equilibrium—the righting of a disordered world that could be achieved only in the musical dimension.

Operas change their political meaning as they are performed in different political settings. In 1776, when Christoph Willibald Gluck revised his Italian opera *Alceste* with a French libretto for presentation in Paris, the virtuous Queen Alceste, who offers to sacrifice her own life to save her husband, would have been seen as a countermodel to Marie Antoinette, who was already being caricatured in public for her frivolousness and supposed depravity. In 1952, when the great Norwegian soprano Kirsten Flagstad sang her farewell Metropolitan Opera performance as Alceste, the public would have remembered that she had sacrificed her international career to return to Nazi-occupied Norway in 1941 and join her husband, who was collaborating with the occupation. The very different circumstances of 1776 in Paris and 1952 in New York would have offered completely different political associations for Gluck’s virtuously noble opera.

When Alban Berg’s masterpiece *Wozzeck* was first performed in Berlin in 1925 it caused a sensation with its uncompromising modernism—the atonal musical setting of its fiercely alienating assault on provincial German military life. When *Wozzeck* was presented in September 2001 during the opening week of the Metropolitan Opera season, two weeks after the September 11 attacks, James Levine conducted the work with such stunning intensity that the audience could participate in Wozzeck’s psychic agony in a way that was entirely conditioned by the traumatic moment in New York City. And when the Metropolitan Opera performed Rossini’s *Guillaume Tell* on November 9, 2016, the evening after the American presidential election, the harmonies of Swiss republican fervor sounded unexpectedly relevant to our own sense of the fragility of democratic institutions in the face of tyrannical temperaments. Cohen has demonstrated that the history of opera is connected to the history of political theory, but operatic masterpieces also acquire new layers of political meaning as they encounter new generations and newly fraught political circumstances. □

Somalia Rebounds

Jeffrey Gettleman

The Mayor of Mogadishu: A Story of Chaos and Redemption in the Ruins of Somalia
by Andrew Harding.
St. Martin's, 278 pp., \$26.99

For the past several decades, Somalia has been one of the poorest and most turbulent nations on earth. But in recent years the country has begun to edge away from chaos. Airplane passengers no longer fall silent as their plane descends into Mogadishu airport, which lies right next to the sea. They are greeted by a shuttle bus rather than a battered pickup truck filled with militiamen in threadbare camouflage. Neighborhoods heaped with rubble are sprouting new houses, new hotels, new shops, new roads, new solar-powered street lamps, and (once unimaginable) new cafés.

Though violence remains a fresh memory and still occurs, a growing number of Somali professionals and entrepreneurs have returned from all over the world to reclaim their old houses, old businesses, and old lives. They are determined not to let the occasional bomb or terrorist attack scare them off again. Diners in Mogadishu's new restaurants and pizzerias look up for an instant when explosions rattle the windows but then go back to their plates. Of course, there is a limit to this. A double truck bombing in mid-October killed more than 250 people, deeply unsettling the city.

Once an Italian colony, Somalia had an odd history during the cold war, switching abruptly in the 1970s from a Soviet client state to a staunch American ally. When the cold war ended, so did American support for Somalia's dictator, Siad Barre, and an alliance of clan-based faction leaders brought down Barre's government in 1991. They soon turned on one another and none emerged strong enough to run the country. The modern nation-state of Somalia disintegrated into fiefs, with militias and warlords terrorizing the country, and a famine soon broke out. The United States tried to intervene, sending in tens of thousands of soldiers in the early 1990s, but the mission failed and Somalia sank into deeper disarray. Most of the people who died during this period were starving children.

From this upheaval, an Islamist movement gradually arose. By 2006 an alliance of Islamist sheikhs and militias had defeated the warlords. Somalia enjoyed a few months of relative peace but then was plunged back into violence when neighboring Ethiopia invaded, and, with American help, overthrew the Islamists and installed a puppet government that controlled no more than a few city blocks. The government essentially redeployed many of the same warlords who had destroyed Somalia in the first place. One of the Islamist militias, al-Shabab, emerged as a powerful insurgent force, exploiting the

country's widespread antigovernment feeling to recruit thousands of young men and vowing to turn Somalia into a strict Islamic state. Soon, with al-Qaeda's help, al-Shabab began staging devastating attacks across Somalia.

Foreign powers, including the United States and the European Union, under the auspices of the UN Security Council, deputized the African Union to send in peacekeepers and push al-Shabab out. The effort has been partly successful, allowing a slightly more stable and popular government to coalesce, although al-Shabab forces still massacre peacekeepers and civilians. This is where Andrew Harding's book,

was essentially a capo, always happy to rough up a rival. But he credits the orphanage with inspiring his brand of nationalism. Rejected from their families and disconnected from their lineages, Mogadishu's orphans banded together, resisting Somalia's traditional lines of division. In a society deeply riven by clan, the orphans built their own clan.

By the late 1980s, Tarzan sensed that Somalia was about to unravel. Barre was corrupt, isolated, and venal, and he had alienated every major subclan except his own, the Marehan. Many Somalis say they always suspected Barre's government would buckle. The surprise was that no alternative regime

without a country—an expression of ambition, rather than of ability, a wobbly alliance of competing clan interests parachuted into one corner of a ruined city."

That is one of my favorite sentences in the book and there are many others. Harding is a writer of enviable powers and he brings a lot of empathy to his work. His book is one of the best in recent years to decipher Somalia, a nation that has grabbed much attention but remains opaque. He deftly takes apart clan dynamics and writes about the "acid jolt of mutual resentment" between the Somalis who remained in Somalia through the war years and those, like Tarzan, who returned only after things had im-

proved. Harding also had wonderful access. Having won Tarzan's confidence early in his mayoralty, he spent hours with him in his fortified office, in the family house in Mogadishu, and in Tarzan's crowded London flat.

Tarzan's biggest worry was the one shared by most visitors to Somalia, including myself: personal survival. On his first night back in Mogadishu, al-Shabab—seeing him as a stabilizing force and therefore a threat—launched rockets at his hotel. Harding's book begins with an al-Shabab attack on a heavily protected mosque where Tarzan was praying with such concentration that he didn't seem to notice, until he had finished, that several people next to him had just been shot.

Tarzan never admitted to being scared. "The hour of my death has been written.

I cannot change it," he said again and again. Even after a minister friend was assassinated in his living room by his own niece (an undercover al-Shabab suicide bomber), Tarzan kept up his fearless front. "I don't afraid anyone," is how he often put it, in his self-taught English. Despite his attempts, Harding admits that he doesn't quite succeed in getting Tarzan to open up, so it's difficult to know how much of Tarzan's bravado was playing to the cameras or a deeper indication of a battle-hardened orphan emotionally protecting himself once again. Al-Shabab was a deadly threat that would menace Tarzan for his entire term in office; maybe the only sustainable way of dealing with it was being fatalistic. Even though al-Shabab no longer enjoyed widespread popularity, they still recruited devout followers willing to drive trucks into walls and strap on explosives, killing thousands of people. Tarzan survived several very close calls.

Tarzan's first efforts as mayor were to clean up the city. He helped install streetlights and get Mogadishu's roads paved, drawing on international funds and expertise. Turkey, for instance, began to show an unusual interest in Somalia and donated millions of dollars to improve infrastructure. The



Demonstrators at a protest against the Islamist militia al-Shabab, Mogadishu, Somalia, January 2016

The Mayor of Mogadishu: A Story of Chaos and Redemption in the Ruins of Somalia, begins. Harding is a BBC journalist who has logged many miles in Somalia as a foreign correspondent for radio and television. His book describes a charismatic, cunning, deceitful, and at times inspiring mayor, Mohamud Nur, better known as "Tarzan," who served as the hard-charging leader of Mogadishu from 2010 to 2014, a period that turned out to be crucial.

Tarzan grew up in a Mogadishu orphanage in the mid-1960s and early 1970s, during relatively good times. Mogadishu was a lively and peaceful capital, known for its hybrid of Italian and Arab architecture and its long beaches. Couples went out for evening strolls; the city's many cinemas showed Italian films; on weekends the beaches were packed. At the time, Barre seemed firmly in control. Somali officials often earn nicknames (Barre's was "Big Mouth"), and Tarzan got his from an incident when he was around eight and tried to get out of his morning duties. A teacher discovered him hiding outside his dorm room, half naked and hanging from a tree.

Life in a Somali orphanage was as squalid and Dickensian as one could imagine, and Tarzan grew into what

ever materialized to replace it.

After Barre was ousted in 1991, the horde of clan militias sacked Mogadishu. Stocked with child soldiers chewing khat, a leaf that produces a slight high, the militias behaved like street gangs armed with cold war surplus weaponry. They fought on every block and corner and blew up anything in their path.

Anybody who could get out of Mogadishu did, and Somalia began hemorrhaging more than a million people. Tarzan, who had been working in Saudi Arabia as a cook and a truck driver, among other jobs, moved to London, where his wife and six children had lived for a few years. He struggled at first but eventually found work as a refugee counselor and community activist among London's growing Somali population. When the Islamists took over Somalia in 2006, Tarzan felt drawn in. He liked the Islamists; their authority was not tied to clan.

In 2009, a peace accord between the weak government and several Islamist factions brought Sharif Sheikh Ahmed, a former geography and religion teacher, to power as Somalia's first Islamist president. When Sheikh Sharif asked Tarzan to be Mogadishu's mayor, Tarzan's initial reaction was no: "It's a mess, and I don't want to get dirty." He had no real administrative experience, but as Harding writes, "this was a government

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Turks remain boosterish about Somalia's commercial prospects and have been running the country's airport and seaport ever since. (Revenues from the seaport are opaque. Some of Tarzan's colleagues have accused him of stealing them.) Turkey, along with the United Arab Emirates, Egypt, and Qatar, see Somalia as an emerging market and potential ally in northeast Africa.

Tarzan both contributed to and benefited from the changes in Mogadishu. When he came into office in 2010, al-Shabab controlled much of the city. The government was indeed clinging to a small corner, protected by African Union troops. But as the African Union expanded its zone of relative peace, businesspeople and others began to invest and confidence in the economy slowly began to grow. People started moving back into the center of the city. Real estate prices went up. The first dry cleaners in decades opened. After years of hopelessness, Mogadishu looked like it was finally going to turn around.

The city was safer but it still wasn't safe. Nearly every day, large bombs exploded, and Tarzan constantly received death threats, usually by text message: "WE ARE FROM YOUR CLAN, SO WE KNOW EVERY MOVE YOU TAKE." "YOUR FLESH WILL FLY INTO THE AIR." "IN TWO MINUTES YOU WILL BE DEAD."

Mogadishu remained overwhelmed by competing clan, religious, business, and external interests. Many contract disputes were settled with machine guns. Tarzan seemed to enjoy widespread popularity among Mogadishu's beleaguered residents, who turned out in great numbers for his rallies. But he was, in a way, too Westernized by his years in England and wanted to move too fast. He had little patience for his Somali colleagues who liked to discuss things at great length over endless glasses of tea. Too often in his public speeches he dropped references to London that few Somalis understood. He was also openly ambitious, frequently talking about his plans to become the next president.

Soon Somali intellectuals and detractors inside the government accused him of favoring his own small clan, the Udejeen, stealing government revenue, and even ordering the murder of a Somali television journalist who had been critical of his administration. The journalist was shot to death by government soldiers suspected of being part of Tarzan's security detail. No one was ever punished. This was hardly the reason Tarzan was fired in 2014, though—Somalia's then president, Hassan Sheikh Mohamud, said he had let him go to get rid of "the baggage of the past."

Tarzan departed reluctantly and with a checkered reputation. The book ends soon after his dismissal, but his political ambitions have lived on. Last February, true to his word, he ran for president against more than a dozen other candidates. But this wasn't an election as most of us think of one; "indirect" election was the euphemism that Western diplomats used. Around 14,000 clan-based delegates from across Somalia selected parliament representatives who would in turn select a president. There weren't organized political parties or big differences in the issues that candidates emphasized. Western

diplomats, including an American team tasked with watching the process closely, said indirect elections were the best Somalia could do, given the shambolic state of the country's public institutions and the insecurity—having people line up at polling stations seemed too dangerous. In one of Tarzan's campaign billboards, decorated with Somalia's blue and white flag and a picture of him in an ochre suit, he stares out boldly, wearing a white goatee, "already tested leader" written beneath his chubby face. Below appears a list of the three things he thought Somalia needed most: Justice, Army, and Tax. Many of the other candidates put similar slogans on their posters.

After years of being ambivalent about Somalia, the American govern-



A campaign billboard for Mohamud Nur (Tarzan), who ran for president of Somalia in February 2017

ment has invested heavily in trying to stabilize it. In the past decade, Somalia has received billions of dollars in American humanitarian aid and security assistance. The Pentagon has recently built a string of dust-blown bases from which Marines and Navy SEALs carry out covert anti-Shabab operations. American and United Nations officials were initially excited about this round of elections, calling them "a milestone." In the end, the elections became a milestone in corruption.

Several presidential candidates secretly raised millions of dollars from foreign governments that were eager to protect their business and strategic interests in Somalia, such as Turkey, the United Arab Emirates, Qatar, and Egypt. The leading candidates then used that money to bribe elders and members of parliament in an attempt to buy their votes. One investigator, Abdirazak Fartaag, a former Somali government official, estimated that at least \$20 million changed hands in the weeks leading up to the vote—a lot of money in a country with a per capita income of about \$1 per day. Many Western diplomats privately agreed with Fartaag's estimate—he said every stage of the election was crooked and some parliament seats went for a million dollars each. Tarzan grumbled that he didn't have enough money to compete and that the whole system was worthless. He got two out of 328 votes and was excluded in the first round.

Surprisingly, a relatively clean candidate won the race. His full name is Mohamed Abdullahi Mohamed, but most Somalis know him as Farmaajo,

Jeffrey Gettleman

from the Italian *formaggio* (cheese), for which his father was said to have a fondness. Farmaajo was a Somali-American refugee who spent years in a cubicle in Buffalo, New York, working for the state transportation department. It seems that due to protections for secret balloting the bribes did not in the end influence the outcome—apparently many parliamentarians happily pocketed the bribe money but voted for whomever they liked.

The election hardly brought an end to the country's troubles. Thousands of children in the country still die of malnutrition every year; countless others are swept up in the conflict, on one side or the other. Al-Shabab still kills scores of people, and October's double truck bombing, widely suspected of being carried out by al-Shabab agents, was one of the most devastating incidents of violence in Somalia's history. And this year, partly because of a drought,

millions of Somalis are again on the brink of famine. While many Somalis respect President Farmaajo for being a hard worker, his administration does little for most Somalis. It doesn't have the funds, the personnel, or the reach.

All that said, Somalia is making some progress. Mogadishu, its biggest city by far, is more vibrant than it has been in decades. A gutsy group of Somali businesspeople probably deserves much of the credit. It is their continual

investment and optimism, more than anything Tarzan or other politicians have done, that keeps the dreams of a renaissance alive. On a recent visit, I stood on the roof of a new apartment building looking across the city. Mogadishu an hour after sunset used to be impenetrably dark and eerily quiet. Now I heard car honks, music, and bits of conversation drifting up from below. Bright lights burned all the way to the horizon. □

Writing on Thin Ice

Madeleine Schwartz

The Vanishing Princess

by Jenny Diski,
with a foreword by Heidi Julavits.
Ecco, 188 pp., \$15.99 (paper)

Jenny Diski covered nearly every conceivable topic in her essays for the *London Review of Books*: shoes, Stanley Milgram, the women's movement, Karl Marx. But the essays are always as much about herself as the subject at hand. "I start with me, and often enough end with me," she once wrote. "I've never been apologetic about that, or had a sense that my writing is 'confessional.' What else am I going to write about but how I know and don't know the world?"

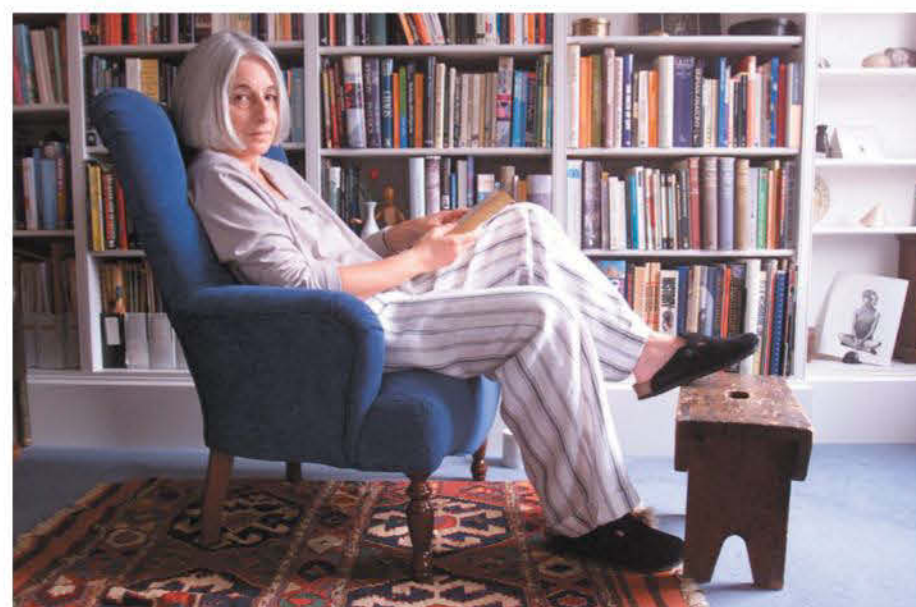
Sometimes she does this head-on, as when she discusses Roman Polanski's rape of a thirteen-year-old girl along with her own at age fourteen. Or in a review of a book on asylums, which she is barely able to write because, having spent much of her childhood in one herself, she begins to get competitive with all the inmates described:

As I read, I saw myself flitting through the pages of Taylor's account like a precursor-ghost, or perhaps more a tetchy sprite, engaged in a debate with her text, ticking off the similarities between her experience and mine and weighing up the differences.... "I should have been MUCH madder than I was. I haven't been NEARLY mad enough."

But even when she doesn't talk directly about herself or her own experience, there's an intelligence and humor that immediately identify the writing as hers. She writes in an essay about Germaine Greer:

The problem with being a dedicated social trouble-maker who has not self-destructed is that, as the decades roll by, the society you wish to irritate gets used to you and even begins to regard you with a certain affection. Eventually, you become a beloved puppy that is always forgiven for soiling the carpet. No matter what taboos you kick out at, people just smile and shake their head.

Her writing is sharp, sometimes mean, sometimes seems to roam. It moves from observation to joke to fact to analysis. In this, one experiences the uncommon, pleasurable feeling of watching someone think.



Jenny Diski, Cambridge, England, August 2002

This combination is not popular with everyone—I remember giving a friend a copy of *Stranger on a Train*, Diski's book about traveling across America and her own time spent in and out of mental hospitals. It was promptly returned. "An American travelogue? This woman won't stop talking about her feelings." But the clarity of her mind at work accounts for the fact that readers who like Diski really like her. She is the rare writer who records her thoughts without going to great lengths to justify them. Reading Diski, one has the satisfying sense that she wrote exactly what she wanted to write.

Diski died last year, after a treatment for lung cancer that she detailed in the *London Review of Books*, along with a series of pieces about her adolescence living with Doris Lessing. Kicked out of her house after being expelled from school and getting fired from various menial jobs, she had a breakdown and ended up in an asylum, where she spent a number of months before being taken in by the older writer. It's a story that she told in many of her books, and that comes up in her writing as a central experience through which she viewed the present. One sees traces of the story in many of her nonfiction books, whether the subject is traveling to New Zealand or the Sixties, as well as in her ten varied and inventive novels, many of which she wrote early in her career.

Take her memoir *Skating to Antarctica*, a book describing a trip to the southern continent and her attempt to learn more about her mother, who

cracked up and abdicated her duties when she was young. (Asked what the book was about, Diski would respond, "Icebergs, mothers. That sort of thing"—an answer both enigmatic and accurate.) The book is clearly not a work of travel writing. Here is Diski on the boat:

Stefan dutifully pointed out some of the bird species which form the real animal life of the archipelago. Great grebes, upland geese, kelp geese, sea snipe.... Me, I was checking my watch to see how long it was until I got to my cabin, when some really interesting bird flapped by, so I missed it.

You can imagine the editor screaming: *We sent you eight thousand miles away for this?*

Yet the no-bullshit tone is immediately appealing. If they were related with any sentimentality, the events Diski describes would hardly be believable. Her mother's grotesque, hysterical attack of madness: "She was rolling frantically from side to side in the bed, the covers in turmoil.... Spittle dribbled from the corners of her mouth." Diski's own ability to spend decades without seeing her mother and feel no curiosity about her:

From time to time, in the cause of self-knowledge, I would excavate, try to dig down below my contentment with the situation, but beyond the strong wish for the situation... to continue, I could find no underlying seismic fault waiting to open up.

The months she spent as an adolescent in mental hospitals, "places of safety, blank places of white sheets and nothing happening."

Plenty of writers have made careers by milking messy childhoods for pity or laughs. Entire bookshelves could be filled with stories of abusive teachers and terrible parents. What makes Diski's nonfiction particularly impressive is that she doesn't try to recount these events like a story at all. Her voice is calm and precise as we slip from descriptions of penguins standing on the shoreline ("That's what penguins do. Stand") to interviews with her childhood neighbors, who seem at pains to convince her that they tried to do what they could to look after her:

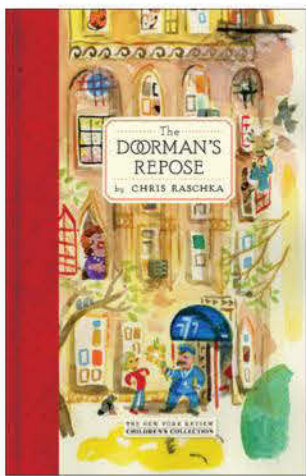
We don't ask. If people tell us, we'll listen, but we don't probe anybody... I wasn't aware... Had we known... She wasn't actually a personal friend—well, at one time.

She keeps her gaze steady even when describing what others would call sexual assault: her parents chasing her around the house, trying to grab her crotch. "Looking back, it's clear to what extent I was a conduit between them, in good times and bad, a lightning rod for their excitement and their misery." Few writers approach their memories of being assaulted as children with this same sort of tone with which they might write about birds. But Diski makes the reader look at the assault not as something extraordinary and traumatic but as a reality of her life. It is something that happened, and therefore something that should be described.

There's a push and pull as Diski moves from her visits to Antarctica to the facts of her childhood. She finds out all she needs to know about her mother—her desire to keep up appearances, even after the bailiffs had taken away all their furniture (mother and daughter walked barefoot so the downstairs neighbors wouldn't know they had no carpets); moments of tenderness and happiness that Diski had not remembered; even rare instances of good mothering. She learns that her father, a charming con man who modeled himself after Errol Flynn, had also tried to commit suicide:

What sent me to bed was the thought—no, the conviction—that I was the sum of those two people, that under the pretence of an achieved balance, more or less, I

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THE DOORMAN'S REPOSE

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"A grand old apartment building at 777 Garden Ave. on Manhattan's Upper East Side is the setting for a series of tales filled with humor, imagination, and sweetness. Raschka creates a plethora of wonderfully eccentric characters, human and otherwise. . . stories roam all over the building and back and forth through many years with quirky, interconnected characters in starring roles. . . **A warm, wonderful delight for readers young and old.**"

—Kirkus starred review



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hadn't got a hope in hell of being other than what they were.

It's not neat, nor does it try to be. Diski doesn't present a redemption narrative or a forgiveness narrative or a trauma narrative or any rigid narrative at all. There's no conclusion and no lesson. There are just the facts of the past and the reality of the present. Her memories of childhood never quite settle; as the book unfolds, they continue to swirl and move, one part here, another there. "Memory," she writes,

does not have a particular location in the brain, as was once thought, but resides in discrete packets dotted all over the place. Or it doesn't reside anywhere, except in the remembering itself, when the memory is created from the bits of experience stored around the brain. Memory is continually created, a story told and retold, using jigsaw pieces of experience.

And then we are back, in a sense, in Antarctica again:

The will to live was not strong in my family. I had my own version of it, which I had developed into a passion for oblivion. . . Depression is rotten, you cannot sit through the pain if your circumstances aren't right, if you haven't got support, or if you have people depending on you. And even if those conditions can somehow be met, to sit through the pain carries the very real risk that you will not survive it. But given that depression happened to me, and I did have support, I found it was possible after a time to achieve a kind of joy totally disconnected from the world. I wanted to be unavailable and in that place without the pain. I still want it. It is coloured white and filled with a singing silence. It is an endless ice rink. It is antarctic.

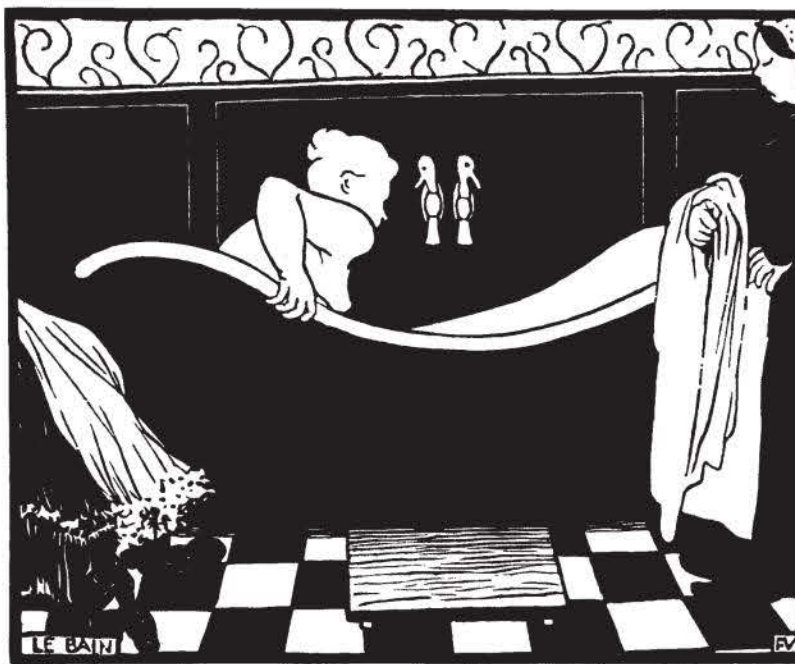
Direct, honest, and immediate, this is among the best descriptions of depression I've read. Diski is able to depict a state in which every sense of observation has been shut down. And yet one can almost see the absence of feeling and Diski within it. How many people have the presence of mind to record their emotions so clearly?

Now Ecco has reprinted a collection of Diski's short stories from 1995, *The Vanishing Princess*. It's a sharp, funny, clever selection. But for fans of her work it may feel like a disappointment, a bunch of crumbs when what you wanted is another cake.

Some of the stories are Angela Carter-like reworkings of fairy tales with a feminist edge. In "Shit and Gold" a miller's daughter finds herself stuck with the familiar Grimm problem: her father has told the king that she can spin straw into precious metal. "That's how it goes in this corner of the narrative world: the prize for doing the

impossible is to become the wife of a king. Nothing to be done about that." A small man performs the necessary magic, only to come back demanding her first-born—unless the princess can guess his name. "'Oh please,' [she] interrupted. 'Don't you get tired of this nonsense? 'Guess my name. Three days.' And what would you want with a baby, anyway?'" She suggests an alternative: she gets three days to make him forget his name. She takes him to bed. "Everybody has something about them which can be found attractive." When stumbling out of the sheets, she asks him what he's called. He's too worn out by the sex to respond. "And so my life is just as my father had dreamed. I am a rich and powerful woman."

In "The Old Princess" a young woman living in a castle waits for her



story to begin. Yet "in spite of all the books telling her about princesses in towers and other waiting areas and their eventual discovery, she was a princess to whom nothing was going to happen." The woman in "Bath Time" searches for the perfect solitude of a day in the tub. "Easy, some might think, but not so easy, actually. It required the right bathroom. . . It meant a day when there were no interruptions: no phone calls, no doorbells ringing, no appointments, guaranteed solitude." Divorced and finally alone, she finds a derelict apartment and spends all her money redoing the bathroom. She looks forward to spending Christmas Day happy and soaking:

You only had to know what it was you really wanted, she told herself, wrapped in her duvet in the freezing desolate room, with the smile of a cat savouring the prospect of tomorrow's bowl of cream.

There's much to admire in this book—the energy of the prose, the playfulness with which Diski approaches her stories. In just under two hundred pages, she tries her hand at fairy tales, erotica, and scenes of domestic life. Such inventiveness is typical of Diski's fiction. Her novels are incredibly varied in their form. Her first novel, *Nothing Natural*, shocked British audiences when it was published in 1986 because of the coldness with which it recounted a sado-masochistic affair between Rachel, a social worker, and Joshua, a mysterious, violent man. ("Feminist principles or not, it turns me on," Rachel tells a friend.) *Like Mother*, another early

novel, is told from the perspective of an anencephalic baby who narrates from the womb. In *Only Human*, a grumpy Old Testament God fights with Sarah over his love of Abraham. (Looking down on earth, God comments, "How touching. What sensitivity. What development. What drivell.") But however daring and original, the novels lack the immediacy of Diski's nonfiction.

As a result, the stories in *The Vanishing Princess* may be something of a letdown. "The first thing that happened was that she got the sack again," thinks the teenage Hannah in "Strictempo." Here again we have a tale of Diski's life, "a story told and retold":

It wasn't anything she'd done especially, more a matter of attitude and facial expression. . . Not looking as

if she minded about anything required an internal organization of her facial muscles to keep everything light and steady, but the external manifestation of this internal effort tended to bring the word "belligerent" to the furious lips of those who scanned the language to explain the anger Hannah engendered in them.

Instead of working in the shop, Hannah ends up in an asylum, where as "the baby of the Bin" she passes the time dancing with the other inmates.

But presented in fiction, the episode seems a little sterile. Compare it to the way Diski would later write about the same events in her nonfiction work. She writes in the memoir *In Gratitude*:

It was the look I could feel from inside my face, peering through the eyes, as if it were a mask which on the outside raised a barrier of contempt, a visible defense against everything the world could do to me. I can't do it now. It's a look that vanishes with maturity, like that thing you did with your eyes when you were a child, focusing them so that everything looked minute and far away but at the same time near enough to touch.

What's striking here is the clarity of Diski's language, the precision with which she captures the anger. But even more telling is the way she acknowledges that it can't be fully recreated. She's not trying to reconstruct her teenage self but to record, with all the distance between then and now, the recollection of it that exists. The effect reads less like a memoir and more like the experience of memory itself.

There are no moments like this in *The Vanishing Princess*. Reading it, one can see Diski's later words hovering around the edges. It's easier to deal with stories that have a beginning and a middle and an end. But minds don't work that way. Our experience of the past is not linear. It pokes through, it prods, it shapes how we view the world no matter how distant it may feel. What makes Diski's work so brilliant is that she was able to present her life in all its untidiness. □

Big Money Rules

Diane Ravitch

**Democracy in Chains:
The Deep History of the Radical
Right's Stealth Plan for America**
by Nancy MacLean.
Viking, 334 pp., \$28.00

**The One Percent Solution:
How Corporations Are Remaking
America One State at a Time**
by Gordon Lafer.
ILR/Cornell University Press,
259 pp., \$29.95

I grew up in the 1950s, an era when many believed that our society would inevitably progress toward ever greater economic equality. Desperate poverty would recede, it was assumed, as new federal programs addressed the needs of those at the very bottom of the ladder and as economic growth created new jobs. The average CEO at the time earned only twenty times as much as the average worker, and during the Eisenhower administration the marginal tax rate for the highest earners was 91 percent. Today, the goal of equality appears to be receding. The top marginal tax rate is only 39 percent, far below what it was during the Eisenhower years, and most Republicans would like to lower it even more. Employers now make 271 times as much as the average worker, and half the children in American schools are officially classified by the federal government as low-income and eligible for free or reduced-price lunch. Union membership peaked in the mid-1950s and has declined ever since; the largest unions today are in the public sector and only about 7 percent of private sector workers belong to a union.

Despite these alarming developments, however, politicians who support the deregulation of business and champion pro-employer legislation—from state legislators to members of Congress—have a firm electoral foothold in most states. During the 2016 presidential campaign, candidate Trump promised to support basic government services like Medicare and pledged to bring back jobs that had been outsourced to other nations. However, once he was president, Trump endorsed health care bills that would have left millions of low- and lower-middle-income Americans without health insurance, and his insistence on reducing corporate tax rates suggests his determination to act in the interest of wealthy elites.

Two recent books—Nancy MacLean's *Democracy in Chains: The Deep History of the Radical Right's Stealth Plan for America* and Gordon Lafer's *The One Percent Solution: How Corporations Are Remaking America One State at a Time*—seek to explain several puzzling aspects of American politics today. Why do people of modest means who depend on government-funded health care and Social Security or other supplements to their income continue to vote for candidates who promise to privatize or get rid of those very programs? Why do people who are poor vote for politicians who promise to cut corporate taxes?

Both books follow in the path of Jane Mayer's *Dark Money: The Hidden*

History of the Billionaires Behind the Rise of the Radical Right (2016), which documented an astonishing effort by the Koch brothers, the DeVos family, and other billionaires to purchase politicians in support of such goals as the elimination of welfare programs and the privatization of health care and education. Lafer's describes how in recent years those goals have been achieved in state after state. MacLean's book—which set off a heated dispute among historians and economists when it appeared in June—aims to describe their historical, theoretical, and academic underpinnings.



The Poor People's Campaign, Washington, D.C., spring 1968; photograph by Jill Freedman from her book Resurrection City, 1968, just published by Damiani. An exhibition of her work is on view at the Steven Kasher Gallery, New York City, through December 22, 2017.

At the center of *Democracy in Chains* is the work of the Nobel Prize-winning economist James M. Buchanan, who died in 2013. Buchanan is associated with the doctrine of economic libertarianism: he is widely credited as one of the founding fathers of the “public choice” model of economics, which argues that bureaucrats and public officials serve their own interests as much as or more than the public interest, and he was the leading figure in the Virginia School of economic thought. He trained many economists who came to share his libertarian views, and his acolytes have protested MacLean's view that he had “a formative role” in the evolution of an antidemocratic “strand of the radical right.”

MacLean discovered Buchanan by chance. About a decade ago, she began researching a book about Virginia's decision to issue state vouchers that would allow white students to attend all-white schools, avoiding compliance with the *Brown v. Board of Education* decision of 1954. While studying the writings of the voucher advocate Milton Friedman, she came across Buchanan's name. She started reading his work and visited a disorganized archive of his writings and papers at the Fairfax, Virginia, campus of George Mason University, where she found materials scattered in boxes and file cabinets. In uncatalogued stacks of papers she

came across personal correspondence between Buchanan and the billionaire Republican donor Charles Koch.

What she pieced together, she writes, was a plan “to train a new generation of thinkers to push back against *Brown* and the changes in constitutional thought and federal policy that had enabled it.” This was indeed a bold project: most mainstream economists in the postwar era had long accepted Keynesian doctrines that affirmed the power of the federal government to regulate the economy and protect the rights of workers to organize in unions. Buchanan's rejection of governmental actions

brought it to George Mason University, where it remains today.

GMU had been founded in 1957 in a shopping mall in suburban Washington as a two-year college. Buchanan was its prize catch. When he was hired in 1982, he came with a team of colleagues and graduate assistants and attracted what the school's senior vice-president later called “literally millions of dollars” in funding from corporate-friendly political interests, such as Charles Koch and the Scaife Family Charitable Trusts. The economics department and the law school of GMU were devoted to advancing his ideas.

By the mid-1980s, MacLean argues, the center had become a channel through which scholars were funneled into “the far-flung and purportedly separate, yet intricately connected, institutions funded by the Koch brothers and their now large network of fellow wealthy donors,” notably the Cato Institute (whose founding seminar Buchanan attended) and the Heritage Foundation (which gave him a welcoming reception when he arrived at GMU). Stephen Moore, the research director for Ronald Reagan's Commission on Privatization who later served on *The Wall Street Journal's* editorial board, was one of GMU's early master's degree recipients. Three of Buchanan's first doctoral students at the school went on to work in the Reagan administration, which made the reduction of federal authority one of its primary goals.

In MacLean's account, Buchanan was responding to the threats that democratic institutions posed to the preservation of wealth in America. Early American democracy had limited this threat by confining the franchise to white male property owners. But as voting rights were extended, the nation's elites had to reckon with the growing power of formerly disenfranchised voters, who could be expected to support ever more expensive government programs to benefit themselves and ever more extensive ways to redistribute wealth. MacLean asserts that Buchanan supplied his benefactors with arguments to persuade the American public to go along with policies that protect wealth and eschew federal programs reliant on progressive taxation.

If everyone is motivated by self-interest, he argued, government can't be trusted to do what it promises. Indeed, it cannot be trusted at all. Bureaucrats can be expected to protect their turf, not the public interest. Every politician, Buchanan wrote, “can be viewed as proposing and attempting to enact a combination of expenditure programs and financing schemes that will secure him the support of a majority of the electorate.” For Buchanan, this was reason enough to endorse economic liberty, freedom from taxes, and privatization of public services, such as schools, Social Security, and Medicare. In MacLean's view, those proposals promised a return to

the kind of political economy that prevailed in America at the opening of the twentieth century, when



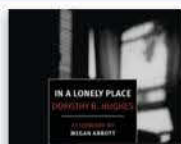
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—Michael Schaub, NPR Books

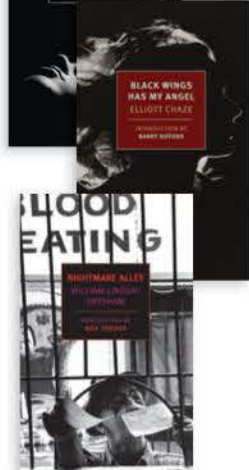
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—Publishers Weekly, starred review

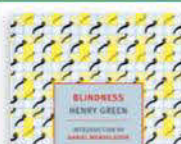
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the mass disenfranchisement of voters and the legal treatment of labor unions as illegitimate enabled large corporations and wealthy individuals to dominate Congress and most state governments alike, and to feel secure that the nation's courts would not interfere with their reign.

Charles Koch well understood the power of academic experts, and he directed millions of dollars toward developing what are now called “thought leaders” to defend his self-interested political and economic vision. Buchanan was one of those academics. Koch bypassed Milton Friedman and his “Chicago boys,” MacLean writes, because “they sought ‘to make government work more efficiently when the true libertarian should be tearing it out at the root.’” Instead, in the early 1970s, he funded the Libertarian Party and the Cato Institute, designed to advocate for what MacLean summarizes as “the end of public education, Social Security, Medicare, the U.S. Postal Service, minimum wage laws, prohibitions against child labor, foreign aid, the Environmental Protection Agency, prosecution for drug use or voluntary prostitution—and, in time, the end of taxes and government regulations of any kind.” Koch also funded the libertarian Reason Foundation, which advocated for privatizing all government functions. Another Koch-backed organization, the Liberty Fund, hired Buchanan to run summer conferences for young social scientists.

Buchanan's challenge was to develop a strategy that would enlist the public's support for the ideas he shared with Charles Koch. This challenge was especially daunting in the case of Social Security. Overwhelming majorities of Americans supported Social Security because it ensured that they would not be impoverished in their old age. In an influential 1983 paper, Buchanan marveled that there was “no widespread support for basic structural reform” of Social Security “among *any* membership group” in the American political constituency—“among the old or the young, the black, the brown, or the white, the female or the male, the rich or the poor, the Frost Belt or the Sun Belt.” Pinochet's Chile—which Buchanan visited for a week in May 1980 to give what MacLean calls “in-person guidance” to the regime's minister of finance, Sergio de Castro—had privatized its social security system, and libertarians hoped to do the same in the United States. We now know that the privatization of social security in Chile was a disaster for many, but the libertarians were unshakable in their enthusiasm for market solutions and ignored the risks.

Buchanan laid out the strategy needed to divide the political coalition that supported Social Security. The first step was to insist that Social Security was not viable, that it was a “Ponzi scheme.” If “people can be led to think that they personally have no legitimate claim against the system on retirement,” he wrote in a paper for the Cato Institute, it will “make abandonment of the system look more attractive.” Then those currently receiving benefits must be reassured that nothing will change for them. “*Their* benefits,” as MacLean puts it, “would not be cut.” Taxpayers,

in turn, would have to be promised, as Buchanan says, “that the burden of bailing out would not be allowed to fall disproportionately on the particular generation that would pay taxes immediately after the institutional reform takes place.” Cultivating these expectations would not only make taxpayers more ready to abandon the system; it would also build resentment among those who expect never to get payments comparable to those receiving the initial bailout.

After they announce the insolvency of Social Security, Buchanan argued, the system's critics should “propose increases in the retirement age and increases in payroll taxes,” which would, MacLean writes, “irritate recipients at all income levels, but particularly those who are just on the wrong side of the



President Trump with charter and private school students at the White House, May 2017

cutoff and now would have to pay more and work longer.” Calls for protecting Social Security with progressive taxation formulas would emphasize the redistributive character of the program and isolate progressives. “To the extent that participants come to perceive the system as a complex transfer scheme between current income classes instead of strictly between generations,” Buchanan predicted, “the ‘insurance contract’ image will become tarnished” and its public support will be compromised.

Critics of MacLean claim she overstates her case because Buchanan was merely presenting both sides of the issue. But it is indisputable that Cato and other Koch-funded policy centers favor privatization of government programs like Social Security and public education. The genius of their strategy was in describing their efforts to change government programs as “reforms,” when in fact they were intended from the outset to result in their destruction. This rebranding depended on think tanks amply funded by Charles Koch, his like-minded brother David, and other ideologically friendly sponsors. Charles Koch funded the James Buchanan Center at GMU with a gift of \$10 million. The libertarian philosophy funded by Koch and developed by Buchanan has close affinities with the Tea Party and Freedom Caucus of the Republican Party, which oppose federal spending on almost anything other than the military and has placed its members at the highest levels of the Trump administration, including Vice President Mike Pence and Mick Mulvaney, the director of the Office of Management and Budget.

MacLean's argument that Buchanan knowingly engineered a strategy for

the wealthy to preserve their hold on American democracy has prompted intense resistance. She has been repeatedly attacked on libertarian blogs, historical websites, and even in *The Washington Post*. The attacks are sometimes personal: Steve Horwitz, a libertarian economist who called MacLean's book “a travesty of historical scholarship,” earned his degrees at GMU, where Buchanan was one of his professors. Most of her prominent critics—Michael Munger, David Bernstein, Steven Hayward, David Boaz—are libertarians; some receive funding from the Koch brothers. They accuse her of unjustly berating a legitimate area of economic inquiry and overstating the evidence against Buchanan in support of her position. Other critics have come from the political center.

The political scientists Henry Farrell and Steven Teles, for instance, have argued that MacLean overstates the extent to which Buchanan and his supporters were “implementing a single master plan with fiendish efficiency.” MacLean has replied to her critics that her book demonstrates that Buchanan was part of a much larger movement.

MacLean's reputation will no doubt survive. She has written a carefully documented book about issues that matter to the future of our democracy and established the close and sympathetic connections between Buchanan and his far-right financial patrons. However fierce they might be, her critics have been unable to refute the central message of her important book: that the ongoing abandonment of progressive taxation and the social benefits it gives most people is undergirded by a libertarian economic movement funded by wealthy corporate benefactors. The dismantling of basic government functions by the Trump administration, such as Betsy DeVos's efforts to privatize public education, shows the continuing influence of Buchanan's libertarian ideas.

Gordon Lafer's *The One Percent Solution* is a worthy companion to *Democracy in Chains*. Lafer does not write about Buchanan and the Virginia School, but he meticulously demonstrates how the Koch brothers and the Supreme Court's *Citizens United* decision of 2010 have influenced elections and public policy in the states. He opens his book with a revealing anecdote about Bill Haslam, the Republican governor of Tennessee. In 2015 Haslam wanted to expand his state's Medicaid

program to include some 200,000 low-income residents who had no health insurance under the Affordable Care Act. He had just been reelected with 70 percent of the vote. Republicans, who controlled both branches of the state legislature, approved of Haslam's plan. The public liked the idea. But then the Koch brothers' advocacy group Americans for Prosperity sent field organizers into the state to fight the expansion, ran television ads against it, and denounced it as “a vote for Obamacare.” The Medicaid expansion proposal was defeated by the legislature.

Lafer reviews bills passed in the fifty state legislatures since the *Citizens United* decision removed limits on corporate spending in political campaigns. He identifies corporate influences on state-level decision-making and finds that those same policies provided a template for corporate lobbying in Congress. His most striking discovery is the “sheer similarity of the legislation—nearly identical bills introduced in cookie-cutter fashion in states across the country.” What Lafer documents is a coherent strategic agenda on the part of such business lobbies as the National Association of Manufacturers and the National Federation of Independent Business to reshape the nation's economy, society, and politics—state by state.

The many goals of this agenda can be summed up in a few words: lower taxes, privatization of public services, and deregulation of business. The lobbies Lafer studies oppose public employee unions, which keep public sector wages high and provide a source of funding for the Democratic Party. The tobacco industry opposes anti-smoking legislation. The fossil fuel industry wants to eliminate state laws that restrict fracking, coal mining, and carbon dioxide emissions. The soft-drink industry opposes taxes on sugary beverages. The private prison industry advocates policies that increase the population of for-profit prisons, such as the detention of undocumented immigrants and the restriction of parole eligibility. Industry lobbyists oppose paid sick leave, workplace safety regulations, and minimum wage laws. They support “right to work” laws that undermine unions. They oppose teachers' unions and support the privatization of education through charter schools and vouchers.

These are not sporadic efforts to affect state policy. There is an organization that coordinates the efforts of industry lobbyists and turns their interests into legislation. It is a secretive group formed in 1973 called the American Legislative Exchange Council (ALEC). It is sponsored by scores of major corporations, which each pay a fee of \$25,000 (or more) to be members. Lafer lists the group's current and past corporate members, including Alcoa, Amazon, Amoco, Amway, AT&T, Boeing, BP, Chevron, Coca-Cola, Corrections Corporation of America, CVS, Dell, Dupont, Exxon Mobil, Facebook, General Electric, General Motors, Google, Home Depot, IBM, Koch Industries, McDonald's, Merck, Microsoft, Sony, the US Chamber of Commerce, Verizon, Visa, and Walmart. In addition to these corporations, two thousand state legislators are members of ALEC—collectively one quarter of all state legislators in the nation. They include state senate presidents and house speakers.

ALEC writes policy reports and drafts legislation designed to carry out its members' goals.* It claims, Lafer writes, "to introduce eight hundred to one thousand bills each year in the fifty state legislatures, with 20 percent becoming law." The "exchange" that ALEC promotes is

between corporate donors and state legislators. The corporations pay ALEC's expenses and contribute to legislators' campaigns; in return, legislators carry the corporate agenda into their state-houses.... In the first decade of this century, ALEC's leading corporate backers contributed more than \$370 million to state elections, and over one hundred laws each year based on ALEC's model bills were enacted.

The keynote speaker at ALEC's lavish annual conference in Denver earlier this year was Betsy DeVos, who used the occasion to belittle public schools and unions and to tout the virtues of school choice. She quoted Margaret Thatcher that "there is no such thing" as "society," only individual men and women and families. This position supports a vision of America in which the country's citizens express themselves individually as consumers rather than collectively as, for example, voting majorities or empowered unions. When they fall victim to fires, hurricanes, or earthquakes—or, for that matter, when the economy collapses—these individual men and women and families can expect to be on their own.

Lafer contends that ALEC and its compatriots are engineering what he calls "a revolution of falling expectations." They have cynically played on the resentments of many citizens, purposefully deepening antagonism toward government programs that benefit unspecified "others." Many people are losing their economic security while others are getting government handouts. Why should others get pensions? Why should others get health insurance? Why should others have job protections? Why should unions protect their members? "We are the only generation in American history to be left worse off than the last one," reads a post from the Kochs' advocacy group Generation Opportunity urging young people in Michigan to vote down a ballot proposal to raise the state's sales tax. "We are paying more for college tuition, for a Social Security system and a Medicare system we won't get to use, \$18 trillion in national debt and now an Obamacare system—all that steals from our generation's paychecks."

It is ironic that this fraudulently populist message, encouraging resentment of government programs, was funded by billionaires who were, Lafer writes, "willing to spend previously unthinkable sums on politics." The *Citizens United* decision allowed a tiny percentage of the population, the richest, to direct vast amounts of money into political campaigns to promote privatization,

discredit unions, and divert attention from the dramatic growth of income inequality. "For the first time ever," Lafer writes, "in 2012 more than half of all income in America went to the richest 10 percent of the population."

This concentration of wealth has produced a new generation of mega-donors: "More than 60 percent of all personal campaign contributions in 2012 came from less than 0.5 percent of the population." In 2010, Republicans swept state legislatures and governorships; they used their resulting advantage to gerrymander seats and attack the voting rights of minorities. Even state and local school board elections became the target of big donors, like the anti-union Walton family, the richest family in America, who poured millions into state and local contests to promote charter schools, more than 90 percent of which are non-union.

ALEC and likeminded organizations are particularly interested in discrediting labor unions. Lafer gives much attention to understanding why this is. Corporations want to eliminate unions to cut costs. Republicans resist them because they provide money and volunteers for Democrats. Getting rid of them also reduces employee health care costs and pensions. But, Lafer argues, the greatest threat posed by unions is that their very existence raises the expectations of those who are not in unions. When they function well, unions have the power to raise wages, reduce working hours, and demand better working conditions. Stifling this power and making every worker an at-will employee lowers the expectations of the nonunionized workforce.

Quite simply, Lafer argues, labor unions are the only political bodies that can impede the efforts of ALEC's members

to roll back minimum-wage, prevailing-wage, and living-wage laws; to eliminate entitlements to overtime or sick leave; to scale back regulation of occupational safety; to make it harder for employees to sue over race or sex discrimination or even to recover back wages they are legally owed; and to replace adult employees with teenagers and guest workers.

In education, technology corporations are using their influence to replace teachers with computers as a cost-saving device, a move opposed by parents and teachers' unions. Corporations, libertarians, and right-wing politicians pursue these goals even in states where unions are weak or nonexistent. The rise of the "gig economy," in which every employee is a self-employed contractor with no collective bargaining rights, advances this trend, empowering big employers who put a monopolistic downward pressure on labor costs.

Reading these two books together is not a happy experience. They give reason to fear for the future. But they also remind us why it is important to join with others and take action. An informed public is a powerful public. The best counterweight to the influence of big money on politics is the ballot. When you see the strategy that libertarians, billionaire donors, and corporations have devised, you understand why low voter turnout is their ally and why high voter turnout is the only way to save our democracy. □

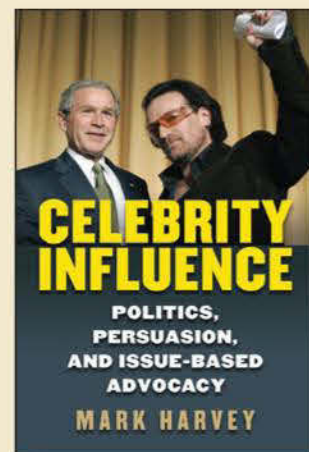
*Since 2011 the Center for Media and Democracy has maintained a website, ALECexposed.org, that tracks the organization's activities. It features lists of corporations involved with ALEC, politicians associated with it, and the full texts of hundreds of "model" bills and resolutions ALEC has sponsored.

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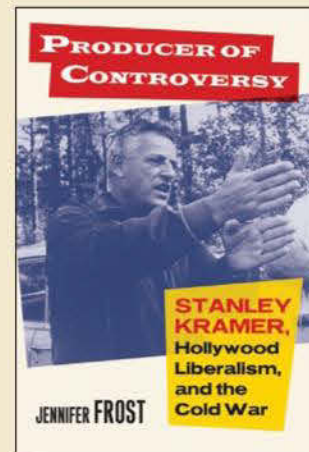


Producer of Controversy

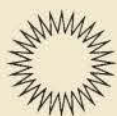
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The Discreet Charm of Hong Sang-soo

Phillip Lopate

On the Beach at Night Alone
a film directed by Hong Sang-soo

The Day After
a film directed by Hong Sang-soo

The 2017 New York Film Festival featured two new films by the South Korean director Hong Sang-soo, *On the Beach at Night Alone* and *The Day After*. Such a double honor has been reserved in the past for only the most important directors, such as Jean-Luc Godard and Rainer Werner Fassbinder. Hong actually directed a third film in 2017, *Claire's Camera*, which the festival's organizers also liked but reluctantly turned down, I was told, because one filmmaker taking three slots would be unseemly.

Such prolific output is noteworthy in its own right, but the consistently high level of Hong's films makes it even more remarkable. Since 1996, he has made twenty-two features, at least half of which have premiered at the New York Film Festival, and he is routinely included in the Cannes and Berlin Film Festivals. If one were to ask international critics and festival programmers whom they consider the best filmmakers working today, Hong would undoubtedly rank high. He is, however, virtually unknown to American audiences, because so few of his films have received commercial distribution here, and perhaps also because of Americans' resistance to subtitled movies and even to learning the names of non-European foreign auteurs. (The same lack of name recognition in the US applies to such unequivocally major directors as Iran's Abbas Kiarostami and Taiwan's Hou Hsiao-hsien.)

For all his appearances at Cannes, Hong has never won a Palme d'Or. The reason, I think, is that despite their pleasurable, engrossing nature, each of his films gives the impression of being rather slight—intentionally so. Hong eschews the self-important and ostentatiously ambitious, preferring instead to build delicate cinematic structures out of seemingly offhand, casually playful, sardonic observations. This modesty is partly a function of his production methods, low budgets being a tradeoff for maximum freedom.

Hong, born in Seoul in 1961, studied at the California College of Arts and Crafts and then got a master's degree at the Chicago Art Institute. A professor at a Seoul university, he gets free rent there for his company (two employees) and relies on students as interns; he shoots on location without building sets and is able to hold the costs of a feature film down to about \$100,000. Some of his films, like the delightful *Okja's Movie* (2010)—which moves back and forth in time, relating a love triangle between two film students and their professor in a series of four quick sketches—are all the more charming

and fresh for their unassuming nature. *Yourself and Yours* (2016) is about a man who is still in love with his ex-girlfriend and refuses to believe the rumors of her promiscuity, preferring to think there are two women in town who look exactly alike—and he may be right. As Martin Scorsese put it, in Hong's films “everything kind of starts unassumingly—but then things unpeel like an orange.” The pleasures are additive: if you see one of his movies, you are apt to be amused but may think “Is that all?”; see five, six, or ten of them and you are likely to be hooked forever,



Hong Sang-soo and Kim Min-hee, Locarno, Switzerland, August 2015

a happy captive of Hong's world.

What are that world's common elements? A good deal of drinking, eating, passive-aggressive miscommunication, romantic misalliances, and male competitiveness. The men tend to be loners, doggy-lustful yet timid seducers, alternating between commitment-aversion and needy clinging. Often they are film directors teaching in the academy and hitting on attractive female students. The women, ambitious to become actresses or filmmakers themselves, are typically looking for a mentor, a letter of recommendation, or a way to gain entry into the industry. So the power games begin.

All Hong's films are drawn from his original screenplays, and his dialogues are pointed and penetrating. But he does not prepare scripts in advance. In fact he limits preparation time (normally an elaborate process) to a minimum, usually scouting locations just a few weeks before filming. When he's ready to shoot, he calls together the crew and cast a day or two before. He writes the dialogues for each day's shoot in the morning, starting at four AM. By nine or ten he is usually done writing and gives the actors their lines to memorize, allowing forty minutes or at most an hour for them to do so. (The dialogues may appear improvised, but as with John Cassavetes's films, the lines have all been scripted by the director.)

It is worth remembering that Godard often worked in a similar fashion, com-

posing the day's script in a car on the way to the set, borrowing lines from a newspaper, the radio, or a book at hand, and even whispering lines into the earpieces of his actors. Hong is not a collagist like Godard, being much more invested in the realistic situations and psychological complexities of his characters, but his reasons for working this way are perhaps analogous: to trick himself into coming up with something spontaneous and unconventional, putting pressure on his unconscious to come through at the last moment while relying on his observa-

pilot, if I try to describe him maybe I will be very stereotypical.

Surely no one else has made as many pictures set in film schools or focused so relentlessly on the power dynamics between teacher and student, the envy and competitiveness between one promising male student and another, or the chagrin that can arise between a director and his flunky. Lest we leap to the assumption that Hong is simply channeling his own autobiography, there is his statement above that he simply knows more about film directors, not that he is the only one on which he bases his scripts.

Nevertheless, all this has rendered Hong susceptible to the charge that he is making the same film over and over. It's an interesting if faulty accusation, especially since the same was said at times about Yasujiro Ozu, Éric Rohmer, and Woody Allen. Hong has been called “the Korean Woody Allen,” as much to associate him with a more familiar brand—comedies about rationalizing males who receive a comeuppance—as for any real resemblance. There are funny touches in every Hong film, but I would not necessarily classify them as comedies. They seem more to be psychological investigations about the difficulty of romantic relationships, closer to the Rohmer prototype.

Hong says he appreciates the compliment of this comparison and admires Rohmer, but does not see much similarity between them, beyond the fact that both use extensive dialogues and have developed low-budget strategies. I do see more of a kinship, especially considering how many of his films start with a protagonist on vacation at loose ends, recalling the vexed heroine in *Summer* (*Le Rayon Vert*, 1986) or the narrator-antihero of *Claire's Knee* (1970). Hong would probably also concur with Rohmer's disclaimer: “You should never think of me as an apologist for my male character, even (or especially) when he is being his own apologist. On the contrary, the men in my films are not meant to be particularly sympathetic characters.” Both filmmakers are tireless analysts of male self-ignorance, immaturity, and cowardice.

Hong is pretty much alone working in this vein in South Korean cinema, which mostly produces technically polished genre pictures featuring crime, violence, sci-fi fantasy, sex, or politics. He stays away from politics and violence, neither of which seems to interest him, and though his earlier movies sometimes had steamy sex scenes, he has not included one in many years.

Visually, his films are handsomely if simply photographed with a functional priority placed on the words spoken by the actors. There may be cutaways to images of natural beauty but there are no elaborately choreographed crane or dolly shots. In dialogue scenes between a man and a woman meeting

tional antennae to be preternaturally, opportunistically attuned to the immediate surroundings and his cast and crews' off-camera behaviors. Keeping the actors in the dark is also a way to draw more natural performances from them: they have no time for their lines to grow stale through overpreparation. Nor can they overthink their characters' motivations, since Hong refuses to provide them with background about their characters' past. They are obliged to be in the moment. The moment, indeed, as it passes second by second, is what you are most aware of in watching a Hong film. Time is distended, and the experience of living is allowed to bloom.

The paradox is that Hong is so keen on slipping the noose of intention, inviting chance and impromptu impulse, while on the other hand imposing certain restrictions that limit the amount of variation from film to film. For instance, there is his habit of working with similar character types from the same milieu, which he explains as follows:

It's convenient. It's not that important that they are directors of films.... I just know more about them. I don't have this need to go to different professions, different types of characters.... My temperament is to work with the things I know already, and then find new things.... I don't want to work with or make films about a plane

for the first time or with a group at a bar, he will often hold the camera on the speakers for long periods without changing the framing. Sometimes he will pan from one speaker to the other, just to vary the shot.

From his sixth film on, he began using a zoom lens, which raised some cinephiles' ire (zooms were thought by purists to be vulgar technological shortcuts, performing an act that the human eye could not). Explaining his preference for the zoom, Hong told an interviewer: "I just felt one day that I would like to get closer to the actors without cutting the shot. By doing it I discovered that I could create a special rhythm in continuity. And it's so easy. I just kept doing it ever since. I didn't want to make it my trademark." He may also be employing the zoom to thumb his nose at art cinema's austere conventions while staying true to his unfussy, offhand manner.

The area where Hong most experiments cinematically is in his handling of narrative structure. He will frequently break the film into two or three parts, each section set in a different time frame or doubling back on itself. Thus, though his filmic style may be naturalistic, you are often suddenly made aware, through chapter headings or self-reflexive shifts in points of view, that you are watching a construct, a movie whose realism Hong feels free to undercut at any moment. *Tale of Cinema* (2005) has a tricky Möbius-strip structure that follows an Underground Man-like filmmaker envious of the short film of a former classmate, and includes scenes from that film. *Nobody's Daughter Haewon* (2013) is a forlorn, heartbreaking narrative told in diary entries, flashbacks, and dreams. The exquisite *Hill of Freedom* (2014) follows a Japanese tourist trying to reconnect with a former girlfriend who has disappeared, by hanging out in a coffee shop hoping to spot her.

An even purer example might be *Right Now, Wrong Then* (2015), the first half of which is taken up by an encounter between a filmmaker in the provinces showing one of his films and a pretty artist whom he seeks to impress, though he manages to keep putting his foot in his mouth, offending her by his false praise of her artwork and unconscious sexism. In the second part, we see the same action played out but with subtle differences: this time the man adjusts his level of honesty, with better results. (Subtle, too, are the slight variations in camera placement, which reinforce the shift from the man's subjective viewpoint to the woman's autonomous character.) In neither part do the two end up going to bed, but the result is a demonstration of the choices we make at every second to be merely presentational or more authentic—one of Hong's main themes.

The woman painter in *Right Now, Wrong Then* is played by Kim Min-hee, a prominent South Korean actress (well known for films such as Chan-wook Park's *The Handmaiden*, 2016) who has frequently been cast by Hong in his recent films. She has also had an affair with Hong, who is married, which provided much scandalous fodder for the South Korean tabloids. Hong's (defiant? self-mocking?) response was to make *On the Beach at Night Alone*, starring Kim as an actress named

Younghee who has had an affair with a married film director, and who, for the duration of the picture, is shown trying to console herself and waiting for the lover to resurface. In doing so, Hong was essentially inviting his national audience to read the film as an autobiographical confession, and to judge him severely, while being fully aware of the ways in which it is a work of fictional imagination—not least because it enters so deeply and sympathetically into the woman's point of view.

The film begins in Hamburg, Germany, where Younghee is taking some time off and distracting herself from heartbreak, wondering if she should move permanently to Germany. She has just met another Korean woman and they are hanging out together, comparing notes on life and love. The other woman, who is rather plain-looking,



Kim Min-hee in Hong Sang-soo's film *On the Beach at Night Alone*

states that she is not given to passionate romance because she lacks "desire." Obviously she also envies Younghee her beauty and healthy libido, but neither mentions that. Younghee, admitting that she has played around a lot, insists that she doesn't care anymore whether her lover will join her in Hamburg as he has promised or not; what will be will be. She seems to be fooling herself.

The second part moves to South Korea, where Younghee runs into some acquaintances from her past while visiting a small city. (Getting away from Seoul, the capital of ambition, and trying to find contentment in a less hurried corner of Korea is a frequently expressed if disabused hope of Hong's characters.) These acquaintances, deferential to her as a successful actress, are mostly curious about the rumors of her relationship with the film director and invite her to dine with them. She regards them as losers who are stuck in a provincial rut. Over the course of a meal she becomes more and more aggressively rude, telling one man that he is incapable of loving, and moreover they all lack the "qualifications to love."

In Hong's films, awkward conversational standstills are suddenly broken when the characters start drinking. Alcohol is necessary to advance the plot, releasing these otherwise polite, repressed middle-class South Koreans to express their desires, resentments, wild guesses, or acute insights about one another. We see a less likable side of Younghee as she turns on her friends with haughty superiority. Bragging about having slept with several German men abroad, asserting that they

are bigger down below than Korean men, she impatiently declares, "Men are idiots!" and starts making out with the woman closest to her.

In the last part of the film, she repairs with a few of these same companions to a beach town. As they debate in their fancy hotel suite what to eat, a window-washer is manically scrubbing away on the other side of the glass, a characteristically zany, surrealist touch on Hong's part. Surreal, too, is the dream sequence (which we initially assume is real) where she fantasizes about a reconciliation with her director-lover, who keeps sloppily telling her how pretty she is, then reads from a Chekhov story about love. But ultimately, to the grave accompaniment of a Schubert passage that keeps recurring, she is left "on the beach at night alone." (The title comes from a Walt Whitman poem.) Mean-

while we have spent time in the company of a singularly vivacious, strong-willed female character. Kim's performance—fierce, quicksilver, and riveting—deservedly won her a Silver Bear at the Berlin International Film Festival.

Kim appears again in *The Day After*, this time playing a decorous, proper young woman interested in writing who goes to work for a book publisher and respected critic played by Kwon Hae-hyo. He is torn between his ex-mistress and his wife, who flies into a jealous rage when she discovers a love letter. *The Day After* begins in a somewhat mystifying manner, as Hong intercuts between his protagonist's guilty-husband present tense and his past adulterous affair, the man dressed so differently in the past and present that it isn't even clear if it is the same person. Soon, the new office worker (Kim) appears on the scene, and he can't keep from flirting with her. The three women converge on the increasingly hapless, bemused publisher, who finds himself less and less in control of his destiny. The wife, mistaking the new worker for her husband's mistress, slaps her around and refuses to acknowledge her error.

Eventually the confusion sorts itself out, and the film builds to an explosive confrontation. Hong pushes the dramatic tension in ways that could seem melodramatic but instead play as sly, ironic farce. Unhappiness being a guarantee, the hysteria of the characters trying to flee that conclusion seems a waste of time. As though aware of that futility, they take a break from anguish

to order Chinese takeout. The last shot in the movie shows the delivery man's arrival, a sort of consoling presence.

The superb cinematography in both films is the work of Kim Hyung-koo. Whereas the color photography in *On the Beach at Night Alone* looks sun-kissed and open-air, *The Day After* is shot beautifully in black and white, in grimly gray, snowy conditions that underscore the trapped, bleak situation of the publisher. In the final scene, the office worker, who had lasted only one day at the job before quitting, returns some months later to congratulate the publisher on winning a prize for his criticism, and the publisher gives her a parting gift, a new translation of a Soseki book, *And Then*. Hong likes to drop literary references casually, as we can gather from his quotations of Whitman and Chekhov in *On the Beach at Night Alone*. In *The Day After*, the choice of a novel by the great Japanese author is particularly significant, since Soseki also was accused of writing the same book over and over and specialized in dissecting his male protagonists' isolating egotism.

Solipsism would seem to be the ultimate source of Hong's characters' unhappiness. As he stated onstage at the New York Film Festival, each of us operates on a different plane of reality, and these planes rarely align so as to bring about knowing what the other is feeling. One is reminded of Emerson's statement in his notebook: "Man is insular, and cannot be touched. Every man is an infinitely repellent orb."

A depressing notion. Yet underneath the misbegotten behavior in Hong's films, the doomed attempts to free oneself through alcohol and sexual affairs, I sense another quest, which might be called spiritual. It enters in the silences and gaps that filter into moments when his characters are at a loss. The protagonist in *On the Beach at Night Alone* startles her friend by bowing and kissing the ground before crossing a bridge in Hamburg. The office worker in *The Day After* demands of her boss, "Why are you living?" She scoffs at his inability to answer and confesses that she herself believes in God, which she knows will cause her to lose credit in the eyes of the sophisticated literary crowd that she aspires to join.

Kim Min-hee may be Hong's muse, as Anna Karina was for Godard or Monica Vitti for Michelangelo Antonioni, but in addition he seems to be exploring through her roles a piece of his own transcendental yearning. Hong titled an early film *On the Occasion of Remembering the Turning Gate* (2002), about a man at a crossroads, eerily recalling another Soseki novel, *The Gate*. In the film, someone goes off to a Buddhist retreat, only to realize at the end of his visit that the hoped-for release didn't work for him. Perhaps, Hong is saying, one's spiritual hungers cannot be appeased any more than one's carnal appetites can, but that does not prevent one from trying.

Finally, what is one to make of the admission Hong made recently in New York that the movie that made him want to become a filmmaker was Bresson's *Diary of a Country Priest* (1951)? There is little of Bresson's Jansenist severity in Hong's droll, melancholy rondo, but perhaps there is something of the same faith that in confronting unyielding reality head-on, we can begin to surmise a larger, more hidden truth or possibility of grace. □

Russia's Gay Demons

Robert Cottrell

The Future Is History: How Totalitarianism Reclaimed Russia

by Masha Gessen.

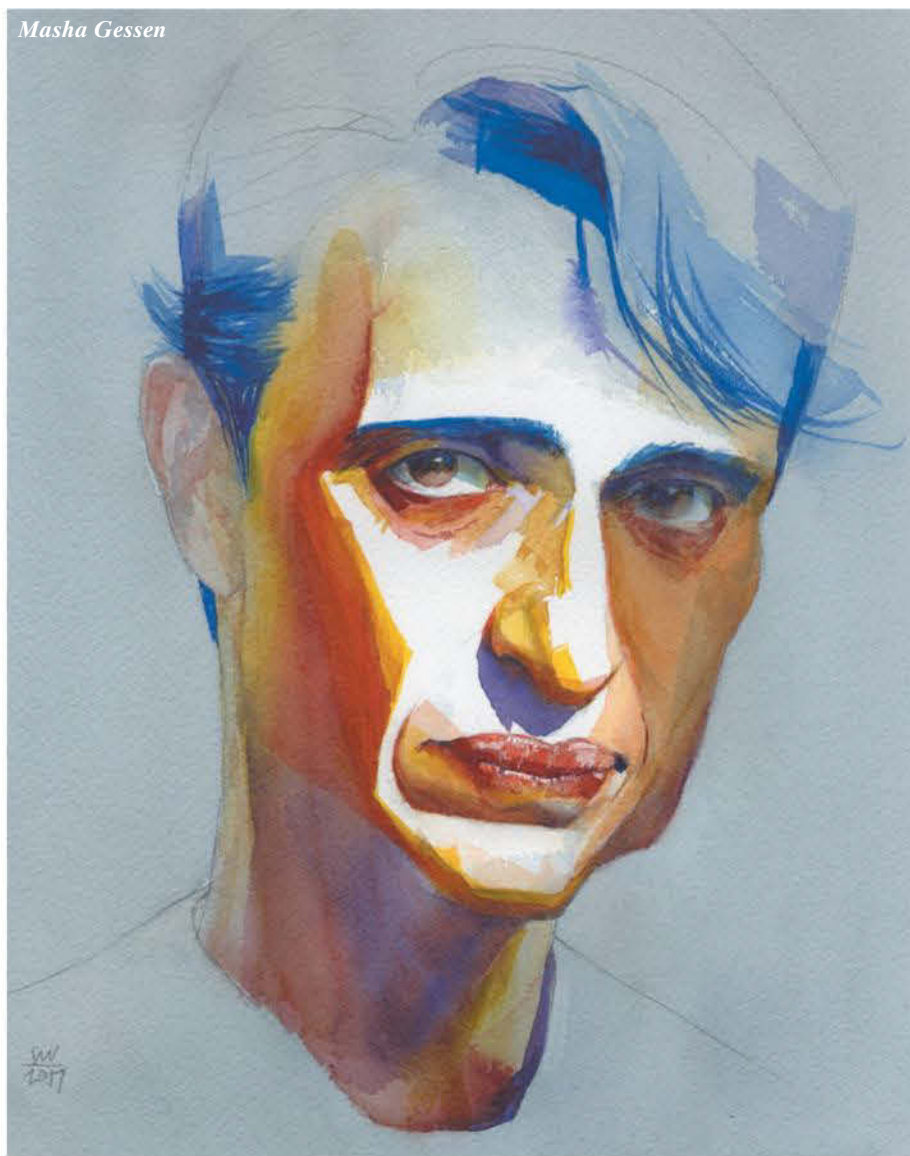
Riverhead, 515 pp., \$28.00

Early in Vladimir Putin's first presidency I spoke to a Moscow banker, with reason to care on this point, who said he detected no trace of anti-Semitism in Putin personally, but that Putin would encourage popular anti-Semitism in a second if he thought that doing so would serve his interests. So far, Putin has not felt the need to demonize Russia's Jews. He has instead identified the enemy within as Russia's homosexuals, whose persecution is one of the main themes of *The Future Is History*, Masha Gessen's remarkable group portrait of seven Soviet-born Russians whose changing lives embody the changing fortunes and character of their country as it passed from the end of Communist dictatorship under Mikhail Gorbachev to improvised liberalism under Boris Yeltsin and then back to what Gessen sees as renewed totalitarianism under Putin.

Two of Gessen's central characters, Masha* and Lyosha, were born into the educated middle class of the 1980s. Two more characters of the same generation have lives touched by great privilege: Seryozha is the grandson of Alexander Yakovlev, who was Gorbachev's close adviser and a long-time member of the Central Committee; Zhanna is the daughter of Boris Nemtsov, a minister under Yeltsin and a dissident murdered under Putin. All four are encountered first in childhood and referred to throughout by their childhood names. Three characters appear first as adults, with private and public lives. Alexander Dugin is a philosopher who develops an ideology of Russian exceptionalism that wins him fame and favor under Putin. Lev Gudkov is a sociologist who seeks to model the emerging new Russia. Marina Arutyunyan is a psychologist who reestablishes the practice of psychoanalysis in Russia after its disappearance under communism.

Gessen's deft blending of these stories gives us a fresh view of recent Russian history from within, as it was experienced at the time by its people. It is a welcome perspective. In turbulent periods, anything seems possible. Only with hindsight does causality creep in, and with it the illusion of inevitability. The infinite possibilities of the moment are lost. Through the eyes of her characters, Gessen manages to restore those possibilities, to convey how it felt to imagine that life in the new Russia could go in any direction.

The tension between experience and hindsight is there within Gessen's writing. She alternately zooms in on the lives of her characters and zooms out to give more general accounts of the major events of the time—the putsch against Gorbachev in 1991, Yeltsin's shelling of the Russian White House in 1993,



the reelection of Yeltsin as president in 1996, the handover of power to Putin in 2000, and so on. How familiar these events appear when Gessen arranges them in their historical order, and how unfamiliar they appear when we see them as fragments of experience. On one side is the historian explaining the rise of Putin as a logical reaction to the failings of Yeltsin. On the other is Masha's mother, wondering how on earth that dull man she met while selling insurance in St. Petersburg a few years back is now the prime minister.

Gessen was born in Moscow, emigrated to America with her family as a teenager in 1981, and returned to Russia ten years later to pursue a distinguished career as a journalist and LGBT activist. She came back to America in 2013, fearing that if she stayed in Russia, official hostility toward homosexuals could result in her children being seized by the state. Russia's persecution of homosexuals is the strand of Gessen's book that shows Putin at his cruelest. She arranges this narrative around Lyosha, who was born near Perm in 1985, and who was fifteen, on holiday in Crimea, when he recognized himself as gay:

When he saw other boys, teenagers like himself or young men, dressed, like he was, in only a pair of small black bathing trunks, he felt heat shoot excruciatingly through his body and a thrilling invisible shiver set in. It happened every day after that first time. . . . I

am a pervert, he thought. I am sick. I am the only person in the world who feels this way.

The early post-Soviet period was not the very worst of times to be gay in Russia. Between 1989 and 1994, according to surveys conducted by the Russian sociologist Yuri Levada, support for "liquidating deviants" fell from 31 percent to 23 percent. It fell again to 15 percent in 1999, shortly before Lyosha had his realization. Homosexuality was no longer illegal. Teachers and doctors could talk about it if they wanted to. Lyosha did not much want to talk, but after a horrible beating from a local thug who was tipped off by a suspicious classmate, he opened up to a school counselor and discovered the liberating power of a sympathetic ear. He returned energized to his studies, graduated with distinction, and came out.

Lyosha built an academic career as a pioneer of gender and LGBT studies at Perm University, but when government-sanctioned hate campaigns made his work impossible and put his life in danger, he left the country. The sadistic murder in 2013 of a young gay man in Volgograd made a deep impression on him, and Gessen's account of it will make a deep impression on you too. Whatever Putin's legacy, it includes—among other results of his state-approved homophobia—three bloody beer bottles and one dead boy.

Demonizing homosexuality is, most obviously, a way for Putin to assert Russia's superiority over the West. The West's acceptance of homosexuality is given as proof of its moral and social

collapse. Putin also sees, correctly, that the equality of all sexual orientations is widely proclaimed in the West but not uniformly accepted, allowing Russia to pose as a beacon of hope for Western reactionaries. To make homosexuality seem truly evil even to Russians who had ceased to think of it as such, Putin conflated it with pedophilia. If, in the age-old anti-Semitic narrative, "they" were conspiring to steal the nation's money, in Putin's anti-gay narrative "they" are conspiring to steal the nation's children.

As Gessen recounts, Putin encountered few obstacles in selling this notion to the public. Politicians competed to imagine new crimes with which LGBT people could be charged and new punishments for them. Even to contest the conflation of homosexuality with pedophilia marked the objector as a friend of the pedophile conspiracy. The crudeness and viciousness of views expressed in parliament and the media verged on the medieval. According to Dmitry Kiselev, a host on state-owned television: "If [gays] should die in a car accident, we need to bury their hearts underground or burn them; they are unsuitable for the aiding of anyone's life."

I suppose it is worth pointing out that just as my banker friend did not think Putin to be personally anti-Semitic, so I doubt that Putin hungers to murder homosexuals with his own bare hands. He might even enjoy the company of a gay grandson. When Oliver Stone asked him a question about gay rights in a recent series of interviews, Putin responded much as a middle-aged Western male might have responded forty years ago, jocularly and gingerly:

Putin: Sometimes I visit events where people publicly declare that they're homosexuals, these events are attended by such people and we communicate and have good relations.

Stone: Is that true in the military as well?

Putin: There's no restriction.

Stone: No restriction in the military? I mean, if you're taking a shower in a submarine and you know he's gay, do they have a problem with that?

Putin: [laughs] Well, I prefer not to go to the shower with him. Why provoke him?

At such moments, thinking of a young man on a park bench in Volgograd with three beer bottles up his rectum, you have to wonder about the mixture in Putin's character of the stupid, the brilliant, the evil, and the naive.

While Lyosha very wisely gets out of Russia, Seryozha gets by there, Zhanna gets on, and Masha gets involved with the 2011 protest movement organized by Boris Nemtsov—Zhanna's father—and by Alexei Navalny, a younger dissident. It is an uneasy alliance. Navalny is a nationalist, whereas Nemtsov is the last and best survivor of Yeltsin-era liberalism, perhaps the

*Masha is Maria Nikolayevna Baronova, later a journalist and political activist, not Masha Gessen.

last true liberal to have held any meaningful political power in Russia. When Nemtsov is murdered within sight of the Kremlin in 2015, apparently for his opposition to Russia's war in Ukraine, Zhanna blames the killing squarely on Putin. Others report that Putin is both surprised and angered by Nemtsov's murder, less because he has any affection for Nemtsov than because a high-profile assassination in the center of Moscow is a direct challenge to his own monopoly on violence.

The outlier among Gessen's seven is Alexander Dugin, the only one to favor repression, to reject freedom, to want more and better Putinism. He is too big and too strange to fit easily into the story, and instead haunts its margins. Dugin has always seemed to me a bogus thinker, a fantasist, an opportunist. But others take him seriously, and he emerges from Gessen's account as a prodigious consumer and manipulator of philosophy and political science.

Dugin was expelled from college and has been deeply influenced by Heidegger and Hitler. He's allegedly capable of learning a new European language in two weeks merely from reading books in that language. He appropriates the arguments of the Russian Eurasianists, including the émigré linguist Nikolai Trubetskoy and the Soviet ethnographer Lev Gumilev, to the effect that Russia's geographical sprawl between Europe and Asia gives the nation a unique, non-Western character. Russia is not a country, but a civilization. The Russian identity belongs not to the Russian Federation but to the "Russian World," and the West is the natural enemy of the Russian World.

Dugin had his wilderness years in the 1990s, but with the arrival of Putin his influence rocketed. His Eurasian Youth Union marched through Moscow. He was given a teaching job at Moscow State University. When, after Russia's annexation of Crimea, Putin referred on television to "a Russian person, or, to speak more broadly, a person of the Russian World," Dugin's happiness was complete. He was putting words into Putin's mouth that articulated in a suitably lofty manner their common vision of ethnic, cultural, and religious Russian supremacy. Dugin wants his Russian World to be totalitarian, which is to say, a world in which the state polices everybody's thoughts as well as everybody's actions. He opposes universal human rights and the rule of law as alien ideas from the hostile West.

Gessen claims in her title that Russia is already totalitarian. I imagine that Dugin would disagree. And from a different perspective, so would I. Take, for example, Gessen's account of a moment after Masha has been arrested as a political protester in 2012. Under prolonged police investigation, she goes to stay in her mother-in-law's dacha outside Moscow. The neighboring dacha belongs to a senior police officer called Natalia. The two fall into conversation:

"Hey, you are part of the Bolotnoye case, aren't you," she asked when they were having a cigarette Masha's first night at the dacha. It was cool and quiet and you could see the stars.
 "Yeah," said Masha.
 "Who is your investigator?"
 "Grachev."

"Ah, Timokha!" Natalia's voice sang with the joy of recognition. "He is one of mine. I had to send three people. It's a big case. He doing his job?"

"Oh, he is doing his job, all right."

"Good. Say hi to him there."

That is not my idea of how life proceeds in a totalitarian society. I sense in this brief exchange humanity and sincerity on both sides. I do not want to generalize too much from this. Many horrible things happen in Russian police stations. But totalitarianism ought surely to be total, if only among the police.

The idea of categorizing dictatorships as either authoritarian or totalitarian is a twentieth-century one. Totalitarianism took as its examples Nazi Germany and Stalinist Russia. The distinction was of practical significance during the cold war, when there was a political need in the West to distinguish between cruel regimes that the US supported (Pinochet's Chile, the Shah's Iran) and cruel regimes that the US opposed (China, the USSR). The former were deemed authoritarian, the latter totalitarian. Totalitarian regimes were beyond hope of improvement; authoritarian regimes were not.

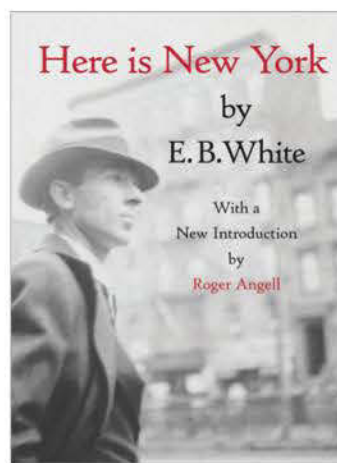
If we accept the distinction between an authoritarian desire to control behavior and a totalitarian desire to control thought, then, as Gessen shows, Russia crossed that line some time ago under Putin. But what if you set Russia alongside North Korea? Putin wants all Russians to think like him, whereas Kim Jong-un would rather his subjects not think at all. That is not a very encouraging distinction, but at the darker end of government, it is surely one worth maintaining.

One problem with trying to understand totalitarianism is that, to the extent it succeeds, it is impenetrable to outsiders. Everything that is said and thought is the product of propaganda. Lev Gudkov, the sociologist in Gessen's book, has a lucid account of this problem that merits quoting at some length, in Gessen's paraphrase:

Looking from the outside in, one cannot see, for example, whether people attend a parade because they are forced to do so or because they so desire. Researchers generally assumed one or the other: either that people were passive victims or that they were fervent believers. But on the inside, both assumptions were wrong, for all the people at the parade...and for each one of them individually. They did not feel like helpless victims, but they did not feel like fanatics either. They felt normal. They were members of a society. The parades and various other forms of collective life gave them a sense of belonging that humans generally need.... They would not be lying if they said that they wanted to be part of the parade, or the collective in general—and that if they exerted pressure on others to be a part of a collective too, they did so willingly.

Another problem with trying to arrive at an account of totalitarianism—at least from a Western point of view—is that totalitarian societies are by definition the enemy, so we are not

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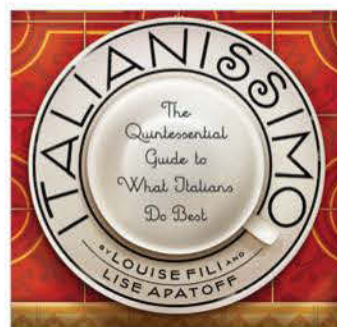
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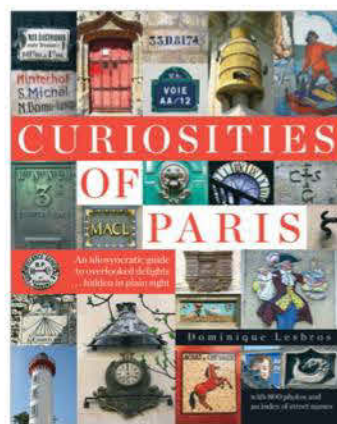
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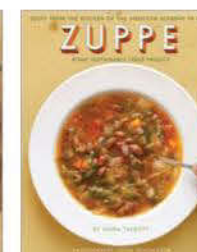
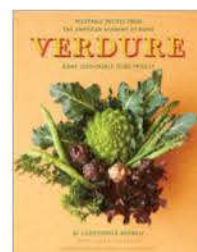
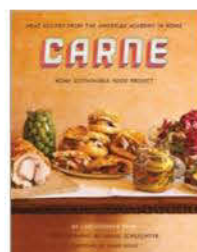
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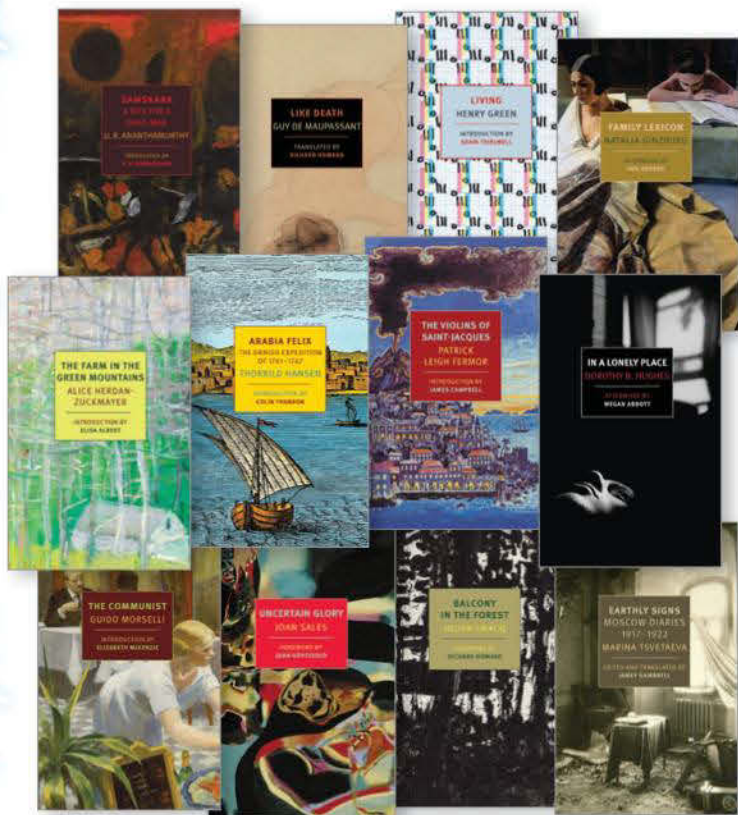
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terribly interested in what their better points might be. “After the fall of the Soviet Union made it easier to study the country that had been,” Gessen writes, referring to the work of Sheila Fitzpatrick and others, “academics began noting how much richer private life had been in the USSR than they had once thought, how inconsistent and how widely disregarded the ideology, and how comparatively mild police enforcement became after Stalin’s death.”

This seems to be borne out by the lives of Gessen’s older characters. Even in the 1960s and 1970s, long before Gorbachev cracked open the old certainties, Arutyunyan the psychologist and Gudkov the sociologist were finding that Soviet academia allowed them a fair amount of room to maneuver, as long as this was exercised discreetly and deniably. For example, although you could not study the problems of Soviet society (Soviet society had only solutions), you could still study sociology so long as you pretended to be denouncing Western sociological theories, or if you called it something else. Gudkov’s mentor, Yuri Levada, was allowed to set up a department within the Academy of Sciences called the Institute for Concrete Social Studies. I also admire Gessen’s line that “the Soviet system offered not a vision of the future but the ability to know one’s future, much as tradesmen did in feudal times, and to make very small-scale, manageable decisions about the future.” If this was totalitarianism, you start to see why so many Russians wanted Putin to turn the clock back.

Gudkov argues that, in fact, the clock never moved. It was always striking thirteen. Institutions and systems designed for a totalitarian Soviet Union survived with little or no change into the new Russian state, encouraging totalitarian behavior to return through them. Elections became public displays of support for the regime, just like parades. Public protest was more frequent in Putin’s Russia than it had been in the Soviet Union, but only because the regime had reached a new understanding that street demonstrations changed nothing—on the contrary, they helped to maintain the existing order. Dissidents revealed themselves and were arrested. The rest of society was reassured by the regime’s show of power in shutting the demonstrations down.

Gudkov fears that the Soviet system has reshaped the Russian national character to such an extent that Russians can willingly recreate a totalitarian society among themselves even without compulsion from the state to do so. A corollary of that argument is that Russia can have a totalitarian society even without a totalitarian state—a useful formulation if one takes the view that the ultimate aim of the Putin regime is the accumulation of wealth even more than the accumulation of power. Thus Gessen, when she discusses the ideas of the Hungarian political scientist Bálint Magyar, can speak of Russia as a “mafia state ruling over a totalitarian society.”

With all due respect to Gessen and to Gudkov, the term “totalitarian” is being used loosely here. It may be useful to invoke the prospect of totalitarianism as a rhetorical way of alerting Russians to the fact that their govern-

ment is a danger to themselves and to others. But to claim that Russia is already totalitarian is to absolve Russians in general from what is done in their name by proposing that they have been indoctrinated into acquiescence. One risks imagining a Russian nation which, freed from thought control, reveals itself to be liberal and freedom-loving. This is exactly the mistake that Westerners made when Soviet communism was on its last legs thirty years ago—and when, as Gessen so poignantly shows, what was revealed was the appetite for a newer and better dictator.

My own view of Putin is that he came to power fully intending to be an authoritarian leader but also to allow some small degree of pluralism in politics and some larger degree of liberalism in private life and business, on the



purely pragmatic grounds that he knew from Soviet times the weakness of totalitarianism. He would rather be Lee Kuan Yew than Robert Mugabe. But he found it personally intolerable to be criticized, let alone thwarted, so freedom to oppose him politically soon disappeared. Economics was a closed book to Putin when he took power, but he came to understand that a thriving market economy required a well-functioning rule of law capable of constraining even government—and that was the death knell for the market economy. Freedom in private life lasted rather longer, but was eventually curtailed, most obviously in the sexual domain, when the stagnating regime needed new ways to mobilize popular support.

The theater and film director Andrei Konchalovsky, quoted by Christian Neef in *Der Spiegel*, sees roughly the same trajectory in Putin’s career, but attributes it to pressure from below:

Putin initially thought like a Westerner, but ultimately realized why every Russian ruler struggles to lead this nation: Because its inhabitants, in accordance with an unshakable tradition, freely delegate all their power to a single person, and then wait for that power to take care of them, without doing anything themselves.

We are close here to the dilemma of Bertolt Brecht’s poem “The Solution,” about the anti-Communist uprising in East Germany in 1953, and a thought that must have struck every observer of Russia at some time or other:

*Would it not be easier
In that case for the government
To dissolve the people
And elect another?*

The Voice of God

G. W. Bowersock

What the Qur'an Meant: And Why It Matters

by Garry Wills.
Viking, 226 pp., \$25.00

Anyone who follows the news will be aware that the sacred book of Islam is the Qur'an (known to Muslims as the Noble Qur'an), or, as it was named for centuries in English, the Koran. The militants of al-Qaeda and ISIS proclaim their allegiance to this fundamental text of their religion with the same fervor and ignorance as the Christian Crusaders when they quoted the Bible. In a work of rare courage and humility, Garry Wills has brought the horrors of the Crusades into confrontation with the horrors of the Islamic State, in full recognition that Christian and Muslim warriors are alike in their deliberate repudiation of the basic tenets of the religions they profess.

Wills, who had known little about Muslim scripture before he wrote his book, has undertaken the difficult task of learning about a text written down in the early seventh century CE in a language he cannot read, in order to show his readers that the Qur'an is utterly incompatible with the barbarous beliefs and conduct of those who have violently espoused an alleged caliphate in its name in the twenty-first century. Wills has succeeded admirably in conveying the meaning of Islam's earliest and most important text for modern readers. His analysis, laced with references to current controversies, is as relevant for those who are ignorant of Islam as it is for the millions who live in accordance with the revelations that Muhammad received, the Qur'an tells us, directly from God (Allah) through the angel Gabriel. Those revelations are said to have begun in 610 CE and continued until Muhammad's death in 632.

As he is well aware, Wills had a famous predecessor in expounding Islam without the slightest knowledge of the Arabic language but after a careful examination of relevant translations. That predecessor was, astonishingly, Edward Gibbon, in the middle of the eighteenth century. In chapter 50 of *The Decline and Fall of the Roman Empire*—a little-known chapter by comparison with the ones on the Roman emperors and early Christianity—Gibbon describes the divine messages transmitted in the Qur'an, candidly admitting that he does not know Arabic. His account remains arguably the best introduction to Islam in the English language. Wills rightly observes that Gibbon "was brilliant at discerning the core message of religions, before the multiple distortions and abuses that all religions suffer from." Gibbon accurately reported that the Qur'an recognized Hebrew and Christian scriptures alongside the revelations of Muhammad as comprising "one immutable religion." Muhammad, according to Gibbon, urged strangers of every tribe to worship a single deity: "He asserted the liberty of conscience, and disclaimed the use of religious violence."

Fortified by his reading of Gibbon and by his own deep knowledge of Christianity, Wills undertook his

analysis with the aid of a new and voluminous work, *The Study Qur'an* (2015) by Seyyed Hossein Nasr and four others, which fortifies his argument that the religious authority Islamic militants claim in justification of their cause has no basis in the Qur'an. The ultra-conservative Sunni sect of Salafis is not happy with *The Study Qur'an*, but it is by far the most useful resource in English for those who are uninitiated in Quranic study.

Wills points out, for instance, that the Arabic words "jihad" and "sharia" do not occur in the Qur'an with the implications attached to them now. In its



A Muslim family praying, Rockwood, Minnesota, 2003

Quranic usage "jihad" means simply "striving" or, as Wills prefers, "zeal," but certainly not "holy war." That meaning does indeed exist in modern Arabic, but it has no Quranic authority and tells us no more about Muhammad's vocabulary as a messenger of God than does the word "sharia," which evokes for modern readers a complex legal system that did not exist in the time of the Prophet. In fact the word "sharia" appears, as Wills emphasizes, only once in the entire Qur'an (Q. 45:18), and there it means simply the right path, similar to the path (*hodos* in Greek) invoked by early Christians. Wills writes unambiguously that "the Qur'an never advocates war as a means of religious conversion," and he quotes an apposite verse: "There is no compulsion in religion."

The Qur'an is a marvel of early literary Arabic. Its name, from a root that implies reciting or reading aloud, recognizes the importance of recitation for how the book is received. The language of the Holy Book, which is both rhymed and rhythmical, is meant to be spoken, or read as if spoken. Inasmuch as God addressed His messenger Muhammad in Arabic through the mediation of the angel Gabriel, the language of the Qur'an is the language God deliberately chose: "an Arabic Qur'an for a people who have knowledge" (Q. 41:3). In another verse (Q. 12:2) God said that he had sent down "an Arabic Qur'an, so that you might understand."

Translations of the Qur'an into modern languages came relatively late.

Bruce Lawrence's new account of versions in English, in *The Koran in English: A Biography*,¹ necessarily starts with the first Latin translation by Robert of Ketton in the twelfth century. Latin renderings were certainly more accessible to the Europeans of the time than the Arabic original. The historian Thomas Burman has carefully traced subsequent Latin translations, which were for the most part produced to inform Europeans about their Muslim adversaries.² Lawrence's review of the English translations that followed those in Latin does not uncover any impulse to assist Anglophone Muslims.

The Qur'an accordingly lacks any translations that might be compared with the Greek Septuagint of the Hebrew Bible, widely used by early Christians, or the King James translation of the Hebrew Bible and Greek New Testament into English. Believers have regularly read those translations as if they were the actual words of scripture and have been undeterred by their inability to read the original texts. This was as true of Greek Christians in late antiquity as it is of Anglophone Christians today. The history of Quranic translations is utterly different, because it is generally accepted that the text must be read in Arabic in order to be understood properly. Translations can be used to help Muslims with little or no Arabic interpret the text, but the words of God are not considered convertible into another tongue.

In the penultimate verse of the nineteenth sura (chapter), God says to Muhammad, "We have made the Qur'an easy only in your language, to give good news to the righteous and to warn a hostile people." Arabic unites the Prophet's followers in a common linguistic culture and creates a barrier to those who might oppose them. The Qur'an does not anticipate a faith that would embrace, as Islam does today, 1.6 billion people, including many who are not Arabs. A simple Arabic phrase

such as *Allahu akbar* (God is great) is all the Arabic many adherents know, although conscientious Muslims often make an effort to learn the language.

Judaism is similarly a religion that depends upon a sacred book that the devout try to master in the original, usually through religious schooling and domestic devotions. Above all Judaism is a religion of practice—of observance and abstinence—that affects daily life: the Hebrew Bible can be understood as a vehicle for its precepts. The Islamic Holy Book also prescribes both observance and abstinence, especially in diet, clothing, and relationships. To the extent that they live according to the Qur'an and hear it when it is recited, even without full comprehension, Muslims are, they acknowledge, "a People of the Book," like Jews and Christians, but their relation to their book is quite different.

Muhammad's companions are said to have heard and recorded the words of the Qur'an as he received them from Gabriel and communicated them to those around him, leading to a proliferation of divergent texts. Twenty years after Muhammad's death, the third caliph, Uthman, collated the available texts in an effort to establish a canonical version to be distributed to major cities in the early Islamic East. Until recently the Uthman text was regarded as definitive. A disquieting instability has recently emerged, however, in the history of the Qur'an's transmission.

Inscriptions from 692 CE in the Dome of the Rock in Jerusalem have long revealed minor divergences from the Uthman text and once seemed to be the earliest quotations from the Holy Book. In recent years, an extraordinary manuscript, written in the so-called Hijazi script by five different scribes as a team in about 660 CE, a decade after Uthman, has been recovered from folios in St. Petersburg and Paris, and it suggests that Uthman's text had not yet been fully established. More remarkable still is the discovery in the Great Mosque at Sanaa, in Yemen, of an overwritten parchment manuscript—called a palimpsest—in which the underlying text has turned out to be from a Qur'an that may very well have been inscribed during the lifetime of Muhammad and certainly before Uthman.³

The surprising implications for the text of the Qur'an call to mind the sensation caused by Erasmus's initiative in 1519 to construct a text of the Greek New Testament by comparing the extant manuscripts. In the case of the Qur'an, scholars now regard the text as uncertain in some respects, although for the moment Muslims everywhere acknowledge the canonical version as the word of God. So far the variants are relatively insignificant; for instance, the pre-Uthmanic palimpsest leaves no doubt that the division into suras or chapters had already been made before

¹Princeton University Press, 2017.

²Thomas E. Burman, *Reading the Qur'an in Latin Christendom, 1140–1560* (University of Pennsylvania Press, 2007).

³Behnam Sadeghi and Mohsen Goudarzi, "Šan'ā' I and the Origins of the Qur'ān," *Der Islam*, Vol. 87 (2012).

the Prophet's death. The message of the Qur'an overall continues to support the peaceable understanding of Islam that lasted for some two hundred years, until competing traditions (*ahadith*) gave rise to rival sects, most famously the Shia and Sunni, which all claimed adherence to the Prophet's original message.

That message, as Garry Wills repeatedly points out, lacked the ferocity that the modern world associates with militant Muslim organizations. The Qur'an is well disposed to the other religions of the book and explicitly cites with approval the Torah and the Gospels, recognizing five "antecedent prophets" to Muhammad: Adam, Noah, Abraham, Moses, and Jesus. "We make no distinction between any of His messengers" (Q. 2:285). The Qur'an has its own version of the annunciation to Mary, who is the only woman to be named in the entire book:

She said, My Lord, how can I have a son when no man has touched me? He [the angel] said, This is how God creates what He will, when He has ordained something. He only says Be, and it is. He will teach him Scripture and wisdom, the Torah (*tawrah*) and the Gospel (*Injil*). He will send him as a messenger to the children of Israel.

Interestingly, the Arabic word *Injil* is a direct Arabicization of the Greek word for gospel, *euangelion*, and it was clearly a familiar word in Muhammad's vocabulary.

Wills notes that the Qur'an accepts defensive war against aggressors to secure monotheistic worship: "If God did not repel some people by means of others, many monasteries, churches, synagogues, and mosques, where God's name is much invoked, would have been destroyed" (Q. 22:40). The only trace of support for violence comes in prescribing war against those who violate the traditional period of truce in a sacred area: "Do not fight them at the Sacred Mosque unless they fight you there. If they do fight, kill them—this is what such disbelievers deserve, but if they stop, then God is most forgiving and merciful" (Q. 2:191). In another sura a more general directive is given for dealing with those "who wage war against God and His messenger and strive in spreading corruption (*fasadan*) in the land" (Q. 5:33). They are to be punished with death, crucifixion, the amputation of a limb, or banishment from the land.

Wills rightly stresses that these horrific measures are reserved for those who seek to undermine belief in the One God. That naturally excludes both Jews and Christians, whose monotheism is consistently recognized in the Qur'an, and leaves these punishments for polytheistic pagans. Wills aptly compares the appalling penalties meted out for heresy in Elizabethan England, including amputations of various kinds, beheading, and evisceration. Although Islamic terrorists have adopted such mutilations, they do so without scriptural support. We need to remember this now more than ever to avoid associating militant violence with observant Muslims everywhere.

Muhammad's consistent emphasis on the One God in the Qur'an is characteristic of the Judaism and Christian-

ity of the northwest Arabian milieu in which he grew up, where polytheism was still widespread. This emphasis is shared with other monotheist prophets of the time, who delivered Qur'ans of their own that were absorbed into later Muslim tradition. The best known of these rival prophets is Musaylima, whose independent Qur'an survives in numerous fragments. These have recently been examined in detail by Al Makin, in an illuminating study of the larger world of pre-Islamic Arab prophecy.⁴ The principal point, which Wills emphasizes, is that the Peoples of the Book are alike in many ways, but that Muslims must not expect to find protection with Jews or Christians—"as if," says Wills, "the Qur'an were not a strong enough pledge on God's part to protect his people." This is a reasonable interpretation of Q. 5:51–52: "You who believe, do not take the Jews and Christians as allies: they are allies only to each other. Anyone who takes them as an ally becomes one of them."

As far as Christianity is concerned, the Qur'an recognizes Jesus Christ as a prophet but, like many Jewish texts, it cannot accommodate the notion of Jesus's divinity, which seemed to represent a deliberate renunciation of monotheism: "People of the Book, do not go to excess in your religion, and do not say anything about God except the truth: the Messiah, Jesus, son of Mary, was no more than a messenger of God. His Word went to Mary, and a Spirit (*ruh*) from Him. So believe in God and his messengers and do not say Three" (Q. 4:171). The language of this text (*Word, Spirit*) seems to reflect some acquaintance with the Greek New Testament, and Wills acutely remarks that the Qur'an is not so much hostile to Christianity as it is pre-Nicene, reflecting Christian doctrine before the Council of Nicaea in 325, which espoused the Trinity. The Qur'an views the Trinity as a kind of *shirk* (partnership) of God with other divine beings. It reveals enough knowledge about Christianity to protest those precepts that run the risk of forsaking the monotheism that is so precious to all three Peoples of the Book.

From his deep knowledge of Saint Augustine and his writings, Wills is able to draw arresting comparisons between Quranic Islam and Christianity. In a chapter about what he calls "conversing with the cosmos," he eloquently describes the manifold ways God's creation and His creatures converse with Him in the Qur'an: "Birds talk. So do ants. So do mountains and stars." Wills

draws attention to the speaking tree in Q. 28:30: "A voice called out to him [Moses] from the right side of the valley, from a tree on the blessed ground." In the Qur'an Abraham is described as searching for the One God by turning first to a star, then to the moon, and then to the sun, until after seeing the setting of the sun he cried out in despair (Q. 6:79), "I have turned my face as a true believer towards Him who created the heavens and the earth. I am not one of the polytheists."

This representation of Abraham as a monotheist or true believer (*hanif*) occurs elsewhere in the Qur'an and is fundamental to Muhammad's message.



The angel Gabriel revealing the first sura of the Qur'an to Muhammad; illustration from the *Siyar-i Nabi* (Life of the Prophet), sixteenth century

Wills is able to bring out a magnificent parallel passage in the *Confessions* of Augustine (10:6): "I interrogated the earth, which replied, It isn't me.... I interrogated the sea, its depths, with their slithery live things, and they informed me, We are not your God: seek above us." Finally Augustine addressed everything that impinged on his body for news about God, and he received the loud and unanimous reply, "He made us." The Quranic and Augustinian texts together make an unforgettable expression of God's message through His creation.

Wills finds similar resonances in various tellings of other stories shared by all three traditions. In the Quranic creation, God makes Adam and a nameless woman, and Satan tempts both together with a promise of immortality. (Wills remarks that this can only mean they were already mortal.) They succumb and immediately discover that they are naked. In trying to cover themselves with leaves, they put on clothing, providing an example of modesty for Muslims: "O children of Adam, we have given you clothing to cover your genitals and as adornment. The clothing of righteousness is best. That is one of God's signs, so that people may remember" (Q. 7:26).

Adam repents and transmits to future generations that God is One and only One.

Noah follows as the second prophet, and although the Qur'an gives relatively little space to the flood, there is just enough to show that God saw it as an occasion to rid the world of sinners: "They were drowned and sent to hell" (Q. 71:25). Abraham, to whom the Qur'an devotes 245 verses, comes next as a defender of monotheism and a leader of the people. The aborted command to sacrifice his son Isaac, as told in the Bible, appears in the Qur'an as a dream in which Abraham agrees to sacrifice his son as God wishes. Although the son is given no name, he appears to have been Ishmael, Abraham's child by Hagar the handmaid, and this provides Muslims with a line of succession through Ishmael. The prophets Moses, Jesus, and Muhammad follow. This grand procession is the spiritual genealogy of Islam.

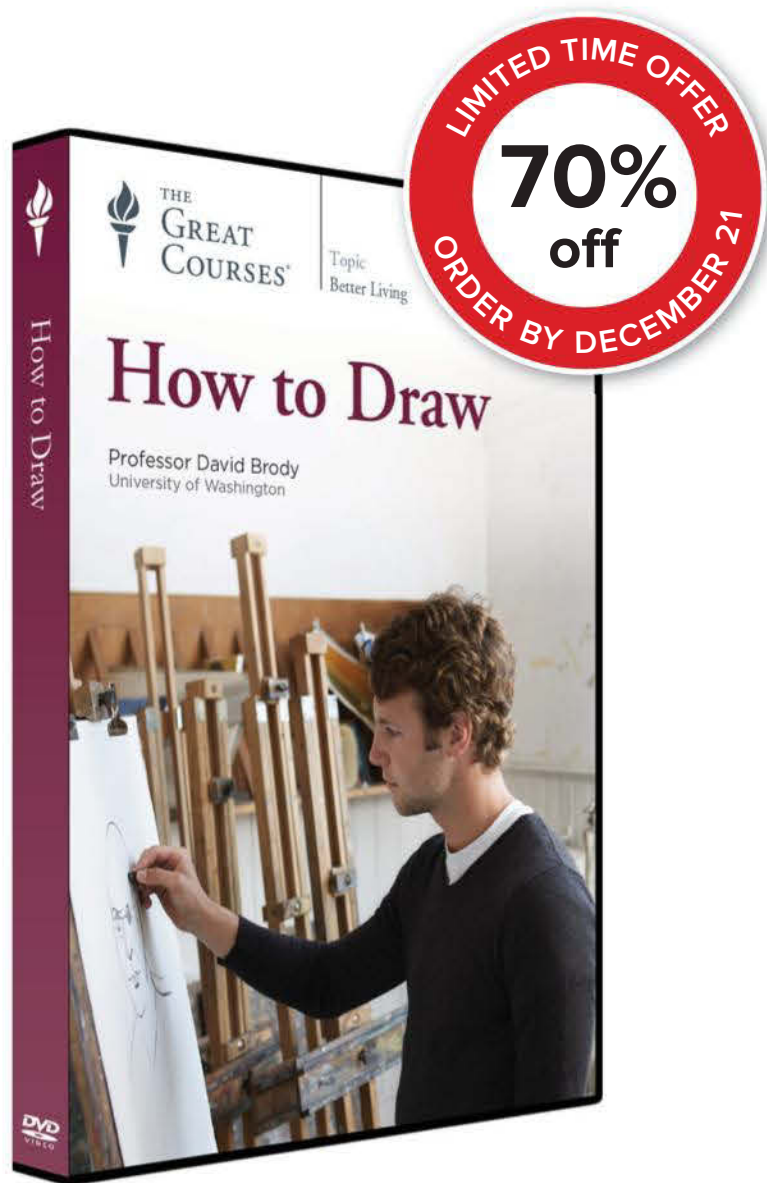
Wills concludes his account of Quranic doctrine with a candid view of its treatment of women, which, as he rightly observes, arises from the ancient Arabian practice of "polygyny," or men having many wives. The most troubling of the Quranic verses to address this topic is Q. 4:34: "If you fear bad conduct from your wives, advise them, then ignore them in bed, then strike them. If they obey you, you have no right to act against them." This brutal verse evokes others that openly equate a woman with half a man. "In inheritance God ordains that a son should have the

equivalent of two daughters' share" (Q. 4:11). Yet such an archaic view of women can be balanced by the surprisingly evenhanded version of Satan's temptation of Adam and the unnamed Eve, who is not blamed for the transgression as she is in the Hebrew Bible. Wills reminds us of Aristotle's opinion that a woman is a defective man and of Thomas Aquinas's description of a woman as an accidental man. The early Islamic attitude was not peculiar to the ancient Near East.

Inevitably the Qur'an is rooted in its time, just as the brutal parts of the Hebrew Bible are. Even so, much of what the Qur'an proclaims is more benevolent and less barbarous than many of the fundamentalist doctrines that emerged in later centuries. We must remember that there is no jihad in the sense of holy war in the Qur'an and that there is no legal system called sharia. The Muslim Holy Book undoubtedly affirms the need to destroy those who take up arms against the One God. But it proudly acknowledges its affinity with the two other great monotheistic religions that preceded it and recognizes their prophets. This is why the Qur'an firmly anchors Islam among the Abrahamic religions. □

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⁴Al Makin, *Representing the Enemy: Musaylima in Muslim Literature* (Frankfurt: Peter Lang, 2010).



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Barbarians Out!

Rana Mitter

**Out of China:
How the Chinese Ended
the Era of Western Domination**
by Robert Bickers.
Harvard University Press,
532 pp., \$35.00

1.

Just as Donald Trump was being inaugurated last January, the *People's Daily*, the mouthpiece of the Chinese Communist Party, declared: "Western-style democracy used to be a recognized power in history to drive social development. But now it has reached its limits." Two years earlier, China's education minister, Yuan Guiren, told a conference of academics that they should "by no means allow teaching materials that disseminate Western values in our classrooms."¹ These statements are just two examples of an ever more evident theme of Xi Jinping's tenure as China's paramount leader. Behind the strident rhetoric lies a long-standing fear that somehow the "West" will take over and destroy China's sense of itself.

The fear may be misplaced, but it is not surprising. The West and China have been intertwined for nearly two centuries, and the relationship has often been unhappy. What the Chinese call the "century of humiliation," from the mid-1800s to the mid-1900s, lies at the heart of their political thinking about the wider world. The arrival of gunboats, missionaries, and the opium trade resulting in the Opium Wars of the mid-nineteenth century made Chinese observers believe that all Westerners had to offer was violence and commercialism.

In the early twentieth century, the Chinese writers and intellectuals who championed a "New Culture" movement advocated adoption of Western political and cultural concepts such as Social Darwinism and anarchism while simultaneously rejecting the imperialist presence of Western nations. Today, too, the Chinese government officially speaks of the need for "internationalization"—through increasing its involvement with the UN and sending thousands of Chinese students overseas every year—while also warning its educators and students about the pernicious influence of the "West," an ill-defined concept that apparently includes liberalism and constitutional reform but not Marxism or industrial capitalism.

During much of the period from the mid-nineteenth century through the mid-twentieth century, China ceded territory and sovereignty to Britain, France, America, Russia, and Austria-Hungary, as well as its Asian neighbor Japan. In his new book, *Out of China*, Robert Bickers stresses the importance of this history for Westerners who wish to understand Chinese attitudes toward the wider world, although he remains

¹Hannah Beech, "China Campaigns Against 'Western Values,' but Does Beijing Really Think They're That Bad?," *Time*, April 29, 2016, and "China Slams Western Democracy as Flawed," *Bloomberg News*, January 22, 2017.



A patriotic propaganda poster showing the Chinese people oppressed by warlords and imperialism, mid-1920s

skeptical of the idea—characteristic of much contemporary Chinese scholarship—that the period amounted to an "unrelenting Chinese nightmare." His thoughtful, engaging, and well-written analysis helps to separate fact from myth when it comes to understanding the nature of Chinese nationalism.

2.

Out of China is a panoramic examination of the increasingly powerful articulation of China's national identity in the twentieth century and the country's painful encounter with Western imperialism. The book picks up from the end of Bickers's last major work, *The Scramble for China* (2011), which detailed the rise of Western influence in China up to the 1911 revolution that overthrew the last emperor, Puyi. This account starts in 1918, at the end of the Great War, with a victory parade in the streets of Beijing led by the British community of Shanghai and the Chinese government at the time, which had committed China to the Allied side in 1917. (The 96,000 Chinese who went to Europe were not given combat duties but worked at the front, digging trenches and doing manual labor.) The rest of the book is divided into two sections: the first looks at China in the early twentieth century, weak but seeking to make itself strong; the second examines it later in the century, objectively strong but acting as if it were still weak.

Bickers begins by describing the growing sense of anger in China's cities and rural areas over the influence of Western economic and political interests. The invasion of China in the mid-nineteenth century, first by the British but soon after by France, Russia, and Japan, among others, had deeply compromised the country's sovereignty. China was never fully colonized, but portions of territory, such as Hong Kong and Dalian in Manchuria, were captured as spoils of the Opium Wars, the Sino-Japanese War of 1894–1895, and the Russo-Japanese War of 1904–1905; and a system of treaty ports across China gave the West preferential trading rights. Perhaps most insidious was the system of "extraterritoriality," which meant that Westerners were partially immune from Chinese commercial and criminal law anywhere within China, with foreign-dominated courts arbitrating disputes instead.

By the early twentieth century, Chinese anger against these arrangements had peaked. Centuries-old mistrust of foreign interference combined with a more modern nationalism based on the idea that China should be a free and sovereign republic, equal to others in the world. This was not just a Chinese phenomenon. In his influential study *The Wilsonian Moment* (2007), Erez Manela argued that Woodrow Wilson's support for "self-determination" had inspired independence struggles across the colonized world, in places as far apart as India, Korea, and Egypt. Bickers shows that China's delegates had

come to the Paris Peace Conference in 1919 seeking nothing less than "the repudiation of Imperialism as a rule of action in the transactions of nations."

Instead, China had to acquiesce to a dubious settlement in which former German colonial territory in China was handed over to Japan, which had entered the war in 1914 as one of the Allied powers. Chinese figures as different as the dapper diplomat V.K. Wellington Koo and the rural revolutionary Peng Pai all agreed after Versailles to focus on the same task: to strengthen China and remove the "unequal treaties" by which it had been controlled ever since the 1842 Treaty of Nanjing handed over Hong Kong to Britain. The Nationalist (Guomindang) government of Chiang Kai-shek won a precarious hold on power in 1927, compromised by fiscal weakness and the need to cut deals with the warlord leaders who controlled much of China away from the prosperous east coast. Yet it used its new authority to renegotiate sovereignty, slowly regaining autonomy over tariffs in 1930 and setting unilateral dates by which it expected the Western powers to end extraterritoriality.

This advance toward sovereignty was accelerated by the second Sino-Japanese war, which broke out in 1937 and lasted eight years. After Pearl Harbor, the war became global as the US and the British Empire formally allied themselves with China. The war had the ironic effect of making China weaker than it had been before, while also giving it symbolic strength in the global order. In 1937, China was still a semicolonized state. By 1945, it was one of the few fully sovereign states in Asia, with a permanent seat on the UN security council. But China's improved international standing came even as its government was burdened by inflation, corruption, and human rights abuses, all of which contributed to the collapse of Chiang's regime and his defeat by Mao Zedong's Communists in 1949.

Mao's China, by contrast, was freer to make its own choices in comparison to its predecessors, which had had to deal with a constant round of internal insurgencies and foreign invasions. Yet it was vulnerable in a different way. Pre-war China had been unable to keep foreigners out, even when it wanted to. Mao's China, on the other hand, was prevented from allowing many of them in, as major Western powers (notably the United States) refused to open diplomatic relations. Mao was more inclined to focus on China's relationship with the socialist bloc and to create new partnerships with the USSR and "fraternal" states such as Vietnam.

But by the 1960s, China had turned even further inward, and had begun to regard even old allies like the Soviets with suspicion. In the 1970s, after the opening to the US and the restoration of markets by Deng Xiaoping, China reversed course and made the journey toward political and economic strength that marks it today. But throughout that time, and even now, Beijing's policymakers have remained fearful that China is only a step or two away from once more becoming a victim of a world that wants to alter the ideas and

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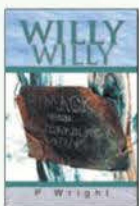
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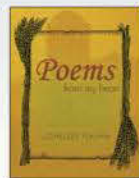
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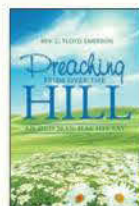
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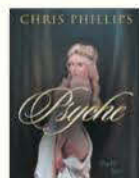
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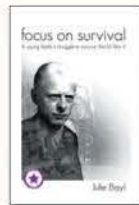
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identity that it has developed internally over decades.

3.

One theme that distinguishes *Out of China* from much Chinese-language and Anglophone scholarship is its concentration on the part Britain played in shaping modern China. Broadly, the story of Sino-Western encounters in the twentieth century has been dominated by the tumultuous relationship between China and the US, with the principal participants on the American side being figures such as Henry Luce, a magazine magnate and Republican adviser, and Richard Nixon. Discussion of Europe's influence on China during the twentieth century has been increasingly confined to shorthand secondary cultural references, such as the love of croissants that Deng Xiaoping developed in France as a student in the 1920s.

Yet Britain in particular profoundly influenced modern China. When architectural historians think of the great cities of British imperialism, Bombay and Cape Town tend to come to mind. They rarely mention Shanghai. However, a stroll down the Bund, the waterfront in the heart of the city, lined by buildings that combine imperial pomp with the art deco and modernism of the interwar years, reminds one of Britain's historical dominance. Halfway down the Bund, the entrance hall of the old Hong Kong and Shanghai Bank (now the Pudong Development Bank) features mosaic murals of eight cities where it previously had branches, among them Calcutta, Hong Kong, and London. The bank was just one of the institutions that tied China to British imperial interests.

Technically, the center of Shanghai was an "International Settlement," a term devised by the British in the nineteenth century to describe a zone that was run by an autonomous Municipal Council of foreigners, rather than by a colonial governor. Americans and Japanese contributed to the Settlement as councilors and taxpayers, supporting its police force and bureaucracy, but its government and culture were markedly British—at best, in Bickers's phrase, a sort of "Anglo-cosmopolitanism." More powerful, if less visible, was the Maritime Customs Service, established in 1854 to gather tariff revenue from imports. It was an agency of the Chinese government and lasted until 1950, but it, too, was shaped by Britain. All but one of its inspectors-general were British, and one of them, Sir Robert Hart, spent nearly half a century in charge.

Bickers analyzes the interaction between Britain and China, and divests it of any false romance or glamour. The sheer violence of colonialism echoes throughout the book. On May 30, 1925, police under British command, panicking as they were confronted by a demonstration against imperialism, shot at students and workers in central Shanghai; twelve died. Over the next few weeks, protests intensified across China. In Guangzhou (Canton) on June 23, a hot summer day, protesters gathered on Shamian Island. "We do not know who opened fire," Bickers writes, "but we do know that in the ensuing twenty-minute slaughter, as French and British machine guns raked the column at 30 yards range across the canal, at least fifty-two Chinese and one Frenchman lost their lives." This

came just six years after the Amritsar Massacre in India, in which British troops opened fire on unarmed civilian protesters, perhaps the archetypal example of how empires ultimately rely upon violence to maintain control.

Bickers argues that the killings in China resulted in part from the imperial powers' inability to understand that it had been moving, painfully but genuinely, toward becoming a modern society. Student nationalist movements, hygienic reform, and a strong Chinese presence at the League of Nations amounted to very little when the British were faced with a crowd of Chinese protesters. Indeed, "in most foreign eyes, every gathering was a potential mob" no better than the violent rebels who had besieged the foreign legations in Beijing as part of the Boxer Rebellion in the summer of 1900.

However, Britain began to lose its hold as China's more outward-looking leaders realized that their anti-imperialist aspirations were better aligned with the American self-image than with that of the British or French. Many Americans felt that if the archetypal British figure in China was a red-coated soldier sacking the Summer Palace after the Boxers were defeated, then the American equivalent was a missionary or a sympathetic writer such as Pearl S. Buck. This image was only partially true at best, as the US shared in the spoils of imperialism; American missionaries and businessmen alike were protected by the hated system of extraterritoriality. Still, some Chinese persuaded themselves that the flattering image of the US as a champion of anti-imperialism put that nation firmly on China's side.

Perhaps the most powerful Americanophile was Song Meiling (Soong May-ling), often known as Madame Chiang Kai-shek, the wife of the leader of China's Nationalist government from 1927 to 1975 (on the island of Taiwan after 1949). Song came from a wealthy Chinese diaspora family and was sent to Wellesley College to improve her knowledge of American customs and the English language. After war broke out between China and Japan in 1937, she lobbied ceaselessly in the US for American entry into the war in Asia ("China—first to fight!" read the posters intended to shame the neutral American public), and she knew the power of the unexpected gesture. "Two baby pandas arrived at the Bronx Zoo just after the Pacific War commenced," Bickers notes drily, "heralded as 'furry emblems of China's gratitude' for the work of United China Relief."

Song Meiling has frequently been dismissed as a glamorous butterfly, and stories of her extravagance abounded during World War II. Bickers notes that in 1943, she supposedly reserved an entire floor of the Waldorf-Astoria hotel. Yet she was probably the single most prominent woman in global politics of the mid-twentieth century (rivaled only by Eleanor Roosevelt). Song and her husband, boosted by the Luce press, embodied the idea of China as a rising nation that deserved its own sovereignty. Chiang was the China insider, convinced that China needed authoritarian militarism to modernize and to expel the foreigners, a view that he expressed in his 1943 tract *China's Destiny*. Song's fluent, if florid, English and charming Westernized manners allowed her to convey to

American leaders like Roosevelt and Wendell Willkie that Nationalist China was a nascent democracy not unlike the US. Liberal democracy was not, in the end, the destination of Chiang's government. Still, the primary aim of Asia's first power couple was achieved: when the war ended, no power, not Britain, the US, or Japan, would encroach on China's rights. But it was their Communist successors who would reap the benefit.

4.

Even as China was trying to assert its independence from Western influence



A propaganda poster issued by the Nationalist army, exhorting the Chinese to keep fighting against foreign imperialists, 1920s

during the interwar years, its political and intellectual leaders began a new campaign to shape the way it was perceived by the West. In the 1930s, Japan was regarded as the most advanced and modern Asian power, and the increasing encroachment of Japanese troops into China was seen by at least some Westerners as no less than China deserved. To reassert its identity and resist Japan's influence, the Nationalist government promoted China's ancient culture. On November 28, 1935, the "International Exhibition of Chinese Art" opened at the Royal Academy of Art in London. Featuring a nineteen-foot-high, 1,300-year-old statue of the Maitreya Buddha, the exhibition of treasures from the Forbidden City served to demonstrate that China was not simply a supplier of curios but played a major part in a changing global story of art. Bickers argues that by making the case for China's cultural longevity, the Nationalist government hoped to provoke sympathy for China's political weakness.

In the US, the Chinese turned to the movie industry for their cultural promotion. Even in those early days, Hollywood's producers sought to attract as many Chinese viewers as possible, and a thumbs-down from the censors in Nanjing (Chiang's capital) could mean significant losses. Frank Capra's *The Bitter Tea of General Yen* (1933), despite its relatively progressive attitude toward racial "miscegenation," was roundly condemned by Chinese diplomats, and Columbia Pictures eventually issued an apology.

Astonishingly, the studios permitted a Chinese diplomat (the twenty-three-year-old Jiang Yisheng, who had never been to America before) to be stationed in Hollywood to approve

plots as they were developed. When a film version of Pearl Buck's best-selling *The Good Earth* was proposed, the Nationalists made it clear that "the film should present a truthful and pleasant picture of China and her people"; that "the Chinese government can appoint its representative to supervise the picture in its making"; and that "all shots taken by MGM staff in China must be passed by the Chinese censor for their export." Similar preoccupations can be seen today. In the past decade, Hollywood blockbusters have frequently been edited to gain access to the highly lucrative Chinese market.² But as far as we know, no diplomat from the Chinese consulate in Los Angeles has been placed on permanent censorship duty.

5.

Bickers takes us through the turmoil of Mao's Cultural Revolution (1966–1976), years when a foreign presence in China was not only unusual but actively unwelcome. In the late 1970s, after Mao's death, his successor Deng Xiaoping realized that China required knowledge of the outside world once again if it were going to strengthen its military and industrial capacity. What emerged and continues today was a China willing to embrace the outside world when it comes to trade and technology, while trying hard to keep foreign influence out of politics.

Bickers's book ends with the transfer of Hong Kong from the UK to China in 1997. A song by the Chinese pop-folk singer Ai Jing, entitled "My 1997," celebrated the event. The song (available on YouTube) has its own touches of nationalist anger. About pre-1997 Hong Kong, Ai sings: "He can come to Shenyang, but I can't go to Hong Kong." But it ends with an upbeat sense that Hong Kong's return might open up new horizons for China's youth.

That was twenty years ago. Recent events suggest that the future may involve closing borders for both China and Hong Kong. In August, three young Hong Kong activists from the Occupy Movement in 2014 were sent to prison for trespassing and disqualified from standing for Hong Kong's legislature. In the same month, Cambridge University Press blocked articles about topics including Xi Jinping, Taiwan, and the Cultural Revolution in the electronic versions of its journal *The China Quarterly* in China (though the decision was quickly reversed after protests from scholars and human rights activists).

Nationalist voices in China appearing in such newspapers as the *Global Times* may sound hysterical. But a simple assertion of liberal values will not sound convincing to a Chinese elite and a public mindful of the history of imperialism that the "liberal" West visited upon their country within living memory. *Out of China*, underpinned by extensive research in archives and written in warm and often witty prose, seeks neither to condemn nor celebrate the Western presence in China. Instead, it is an important reminder that even when our shared history is forgotten in the West, it is very much remembered—and sometimes resented—in Beijing and Shanghai today. □

²Charlie Lyne, "The China-fication of Hollywood Blockbusters," *The Guardian*, May 4, 2013.

Whole Earth Troubadour

Ange Mlinko

The Essential W.S. Merwin

edited by Michael Wieggers.

Copper Canyon,
338 pp., \$18.00 (paper)

Garden Time

by W.S. Merwin.

Copper Canyon, 71 pp., \$24.00

The Moon Before Morning

by W.S. Merwin.

Copper Canyon,
121 pp., \$17.00 (paper)

Last summer I had one of those happy experiences in the life of a reader: I found the perfect book for my purposes. Those purposes were vague, and I found the book by accident, but it was the book that put everything into focus. I was going to Tuscany for the first time, and I wanted to feel closer to Dante, whose poetry I fell in love with when I was nineteen. Surprisingly, what I got was a book about the French Occitan region, not Tuscany, written by W.S. Merwin, whose poetry of love and righteous anger at the planet's despoliation by humanity owes a debt to Dante's crucible of political anger and spiritual love.

The Mays of Ventadorn (2002) covers some territory familiar to readers of Merwin's prose. In 1954, the poet bought an abandoned farmhouse in Quercy, above the Dordogne River, and lived there on and off for decades, writing among other things his breakthrough collection of poems, *The Lice* (1967). His study of village life and small-scale agriculture—which had hardly changed for a millennium—informs the short stories of *The Lost Upland* (1992), but it is in *The Mays of Ventadorn* that one reads the full story of Merwin's immersion in the land and language of his poetic forebears, the twelfth-century troubadours. Interleaving anecdotes of his explorations in the Causse region with retellings of the *vidas* of Guilhem IX, Comte de Peitau (William of Aquitaine), and Bernart de Ventadorn, the book amounts to a bildungsroman—written in his seventies—about how poets are made.

In passages rife with portents, Merwin recounts that in 1946, on Easter weekend (he was eighteen), he made a pilgrimage to visit Ezra Pound at St. Elizabeth's Hospital in Washington, D.C. By chance he had a book by John Peale Bishop in his pocket, and in it were translations of Bertrand de Born and Jaufre Rudel; on the bus a young stranger ("Dark bangs across her forehead. Very pretty") looked over his shoulder and remarked "how much she loved poetry." At the facility, "Pound was led down an inner flight of steps that looked like the bottom of a circling staircase in a tower"—clearly an image out of the *Inferno*. And then he tells Merwin—the boy with the troubadours in his pocket—something so surprising that it seems like fate:

"If you're going to be a poet," he said, "you have to work at it every day. You should write about seventy-five lines a day. But at your age you don't have anything to write about. You may think you do, but you don't. So get to work



W.S. Merwin in the palm forest at the Merwin Conservancy, Haiku, Hawaii, 2011

translating. The Provençal is the real source. The poets are closest to music. They hear it. They write to it. Try to learn the Provençal, at least some of it, if you can."

Now ninety years old, Merwin is the author of almost fifty volumes of poems and translations as well as eight books of prose fiction and nonfiction. He has maintained his fidelity to this early vision of poetry, bequeathed by Pound and summed up in his famous line from *The Spirit of Romance*: "All ages are contemporaneous." Translation has freed Merwin to refuse stultifying academic appointments. It has facilitated his travels—despite the French farmhouse, he led a fairly peripatetic life before settling in Hawaii in the late 1970s. But most of all, translation has provided him with "the literary world. Another plane of existence." In other words, a grand company continually needing rescue from the abyss, an ennobling endeavor, a way to communicate across time and space.

After those first translations from the Occitan, he went on to the medieval epics *The Poem of the Cid* and *The Song of Roland*, specializing in Spanish as well as French—commissions, in the beginning, from the BBC, which hired him to adapt them into radio plays. But translation became a practice verging on spiritual discipline. His third *Selected Translations* (2013) contains works originally in Sanskrit, Egyptian, Chinese, Japanese, and Vietnamese; translations from Quechua, Eskimo, native Crow; translations from Russian (Mandelstam, Brodsky, et al.) and German (Nietzsche, Benn,

et al.). Greek and Latin are a given, plus Middle English and Welsh. He has translated the entire *Purgatorio*. (Dante and Villon, he has said, are his "talismans.") This is only a partial list. Merwin's introduction to the 2013 *Selected Translations* reprises his visit with Pound in a condensed memoir of his life as a translator-poet, offering an apologia for an "impossible, unfinishable" art.

All this to say that Merwin's conception of poetry is devotional in its service to other languages and cultures. *The Mays of Ventadorn* is not only a story about troubadours handing down their songs through the ages, but about how poetry itself seems to engineer twists of fate in the lives of its acolytes. Early in the book, Merwin relays the story of how Richard, Coeur de Lion, was captured and held prisoner while en route to England after the Third Crusade. His enemies "worked out a ransom for the king that was meant to cripple Richard's kingdom before he was returned to it"—in addition to stipulating, among other things, that his mother, Eleanor of Aquitaine (or Queen Aliénor, as she's called in the book), marry Count Leopold of Austria's son. But apparently Richard's *jongleur*, Blondel, was pursuing the king's whereabouts on foot in Austria, when out of nowhere he heard Richard

singing one of his poems, a *tenso*: a poem written as an exchange of alternate voices. When the first stanza ended, Blondel sang the second in reply, and so they went on to the end of the poem, each

certain by then of who the other was, and Blondel spread the news.

This delightful tale may seem improbable, but is it any less amazing that Richard was the son of Aliénor, the granddaughter of Guilhem IX (considered the first troubadour), who brought their language, the *langue d'oc*, to Poitiers, where she established a court devoted to chivalric love and song? And that Bernart de Ventadorn followed her entourage as a courtly lover? And that the Holy Roman Emperor himself, Henry of Hohenstaufen, would sit with his prisoner, Richard, and talk about poetry, agreeing to exchange verses? Out of their chat came Richard's most famous poem, and eight hundred years later, it became the first translation Merwin ever published. It begins, in his updated version:

*No prisoner ever said what he was
thinking
straight out like someone who
suffers nothing
but to ease his mind he can make
a song.
My friends are many but are poor
at giving.
It is their shame that, with no
ransom coming,
these two winters I am held.*

Richard's poem comes at the beginning of the "Miscellaneous Translations" section of *The Essential W.S. Merwin*, and is the third poem to be presented, after his first two books (*A Mask for Janus* and *The Dancing Bears*) are represented by one poem each. Among selections from all the poetry books of his long career, the number of poems in "Miscellaneous Translations" is equaled or exceeded only by the number from *The Lice* (1967) and *The Shadow of Sirius* (2008). Translations stand at the head of his work as a kind of abode of the blessed where Richard Coeur de Leon, Guilhem, Bernart, Apollinaire, Follain, Neruda, Borges, and others survive in a gift exchange whereby the translator extends the life of their words, and they accept his poems into their company.

Two aspects of troubadour poetry insinuated themselves into Merwin's oeuvre: a bent toward orality and the chivalric ideal of the *amor de lonh*, or love of what is distant. Merwin writes:

The recurring burden of Bernart's song is distance—a constant theme of the love poetry of the world—the distance between the lover and the beloved, between the present and the past or an imagined future, between one place and another.

At least since his ecological-apocalyptic book *The Lice*, Merwin has been read as an elegiac poet. His long commitment to environmental causes goes hand in glove with poems that lament endangered species, like "Witness," from *The Rain in the Trees* (1988):

*I want to tell what the forests
were like*

*I will have to speak
in a forgotten language*

But the environmental catastrophism, it seems to me, was prefigured by his attraction to poets from “the distant.” He remembers being thunderstruck by the language of the King James Bible as a small child (his father was a Presbyterian minister). By the time he discovered Pound’s *Personae*, a rift loaded with the ore of translations and versions of poems from world literature, his imagination had already crystallized around a passion for ages lost and unattainable. The imagination that can ardently conjure *les neiges d’antan* can also more easily imagine our own destruction from an impoverished future (“all ages are contemporaneous” cuts two ways). In “Witness” the longing for lost forests is rendered mute; the forest dies twice, once in the world and once in language. But in “Learning a Dead Language,” an earlier poem from *Green with Beasts* (1956), the death of languages foretells human extinction, and contrariwise their recovery holds hope for ours:

*There is nothing for you to say.
You must
Learn first to listen. Because it is
dead
It will not come to you of itself,
nor would you
Of yourself master it. You must
therefore
Learn to be still when it is
imparted,
And, though you may not yet
understand, to remember.*

*What you remember is saved.
To understand
The least thing fully you would
have to perceive
The whole grammar in all its
accidence
And all its system, in the perfect
singleness
Of intention it has because it is
dead.
You can only learn one part at a
time.*

The poem may have arisen from Merwin’s attempts to learn the dialect of his Quercy neighbors. A sort of *amor de lonh* informs his zeal for his adopted home—“the awareness of the deep past was inseparable from the lure of the land.” The ghost of a sestina (invented, they say, by the troubadour Arnaut Daniel) haunts these six-line stanzas, with their repetitions of individual words (though they don’t repeat mechanically at the ends of the lines, as they do in the sestina). What is repeated? *Learn, dead, remember, understand.* As the poem goes on, it repeats *saved, intention, order, passion.* Here is the fifth and final stanza:

*What you remember saves you.
To remember
Is not to rehearse, but to hear
what never
Has fallen silent. So your
learning is,
From the dead, order, and what
sense of yourself
Is memorable, what passion may
be heard
When there is nothing for you to
say.*

The poem turns on what “nothing” means, either the “nothing that is not

there, and the nothing that is” from Wallace Stevens, an early influence on Merwin, or Guilhem IX’s enigmatic “*Farai un vers de dreit nien*” (“Sheer nothing’s what I’m singing of”), or both. It may be that a speaker is deprived of language because the language is dead; it may also be that the speaker must suppress his own voice, or vanity, in order to listen for something greater than he is. This is a profound recuperation of the self through suppression of the self (“What you remember saves you”). It is one paradox among others: what was thought dead turns out to be “what never/has fallen silent”; the dispassionate voice of the speaker turns out to be listening for “passion.” Paradox is, the troubadours knew, the emblematic trope of the lover. “She kills me, and from death I answer,” wrote Ventadorn.

The repetition in troubadour poetry (as in a sestina’s end words) is a relic of its function as song lyric. Merwin’s poetry isn’t written to be sung (though it’s worth mentioning his early memory of writing hymns for his father’s services), but he has explained in interviews that his abandonment of punctuation beginning with *The Lice* was intended to bring his verse closer to the conventions of oral poetry, to compel the reader to say it out loud, as in his “Lament for the Makers”:

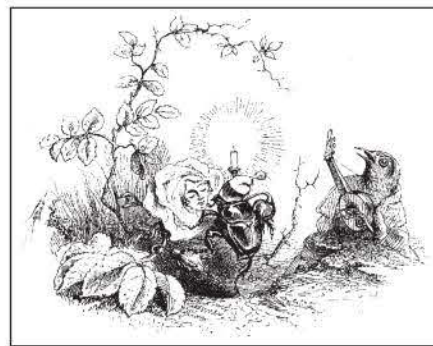
*Lowell thought the shadow
skyline
coming toward him was
Manhattan
but it blacked out in
the taxi
once he read his
Notebook to me
at the number he had uttered
to the driver a last word
then that watchful and
most lonely
wanderer whose words
went with me
everywhere Elizabeth
Bishop lay alone in death
they were leaving the
party early
our elders it came
home to me*

Since abandoning the formal conventions of the English tradition (his first book, *The Mask of Janus*, was written while he was in Robert Graves’s employ in Mallorca; W.H. Auden chose it for the Yale Younger Poets series), Merwin has rarely used a conventional English device; in this case, he is riffing—if that isn’t too playful a word—on the late-fifteenth-century Scots ballad “Lament for the Makaris” by William Dunbar. Here Merwin lists his elders and contemporaries who died in his own lifetime (the poem appears in *The River Sound*, published in 1999). The original “Lament,” too, was meant to be chanted or sung. Merwin updates the oral ballad, not by jettisoning the form but by deranging it just enough to jar the ear and eye; the sentences seem to overflow the stanza in a surge of anxiety. Yet performed out loud with proper pauses, the reader can interpret the pace and the tenor; when Merwin reads his work (video clips abound on YouTube), he sounds like an exceptionally gifted preacher.

Merwin wanted that tension between the poem’s look and its sound: “There

must always be, I think, a tension between the form and the limits of the form, and it’s from that tension, the harmonizing of that tension, that you get the energy that makes the poems that are worth keeping, and that are different and a new phase of the tradition.” “Lament for the Makers,” as several other poems in his oeuvre—“Berryman,” “Rimbaud’s Piano,” “Chord”—do, presents poets as yet another kind of endangered species. They, too, are always having to adapt to new conditions.

For all Merwin’s preeminence as an American poet in the decades since his first book—for all the acclaim and the prizes, including two Pulitzers and the US poet laureateship—he has suc-



ceeded in living at the periphery (or in the shadow) of America; even his residence in Hawaii feels extraterritorial. He has said, “The human institution that I feel is the context... is certainly not the nation of the United States; it’s the English language”—though he is entirely aware of the imperialist uses to which it has been put, especially in Oceania. “But what it is to be an American poet I still don’t know,” he told Edward Hirsch in a *Paris Review* interview in 1986. Perhaps many of his contemporaries felt the same way; a number of them, like Robert Bly, John Ashbery, and James Merrill, had expatriate periods or translated extensively, looking for sources outside their native country.

Yet Merwin is perhaps alone among his contemporaries in his intransigence toward the American ur-poet, Walt Whitman, whose approach to lyrical public address inspired Merwin’s generation as it mounted poetic solidarity movements against the Vietnam War, sexism, and racism. He complained: “The positivism and the American optimism disturb me.... In particular it’s his rhetorical insistence on an optimistic stance... as a world view and as a program for confronting existence it bothered me when I was eighteen and bothers me now.”

Merwin is at pains to qualify his antipathy toward the poet whom Harold Bloom declared every American’s “imaginative father and mother.” But nothing can be more germane to a poet of Merwin’s affinities than the ways in which an endemic American optimism quashes criticism on either end of the political spectrum. His pessimism is salutary, and he has always stopped short of despair: “The fact that that chair may be destroyed tomorrow is no reason not to pay attention to it this afternoon, you know.” It is his clear-sighted view of American destructiveness, unmitigated by any hint of exceptionalism, that makes his deliberate crabwise move away from his native land and poets attain a kind of Dantean majesty, tantamount to self-exile.

Since purchasing an old pineapple

plantation on Maui, Merwin—with his late wife, Paula—has succeeded in replenishing the soil and growing a garden of endangered native palm trees; it was recently established as a conservancy. He never forgot that Ezra Pound’s advice to him was couched in an ecological metaphor: “Read seeds not twigs EP.” Pound meant by this that literature is rejuvenated by going back to original sources. Merwin extrapolated from this that biological life itself is rejuvenated by returning to its elemental source.

Despite the dire threat posed by climate change and pollution, and the threat of his own mortality, Merwin continues to write and publish prolifically: his last two books, *The Moon Before Morning* (2014) and *Garden Time* (2016), mesh the two kinds of life—botanical and linguistic—with the intimacy of a lifetime of dwelling and thinking. That old friend of poets, the *amor de lonh*, has only intensified with age—the true gift, possibly, that age can give us.

The farther the past retreats from Merwin, the more his love surges forth, even for his unhappy American childhood (“middle-class and in every sense provincial,” he once wrote). A late poem, titled “Antique Sound,” mingles nostalgia for turntables with an awareness that the miracle of recorded music is undermined by the errancy of materials, which no innovation can entirely forestall:

*There was an age when you
played records
with ordinary steel needles which
grew blunt
and damaged the grooves or with
more expensive
stylus tips said to be tungsten or
diamond
which wore down the records and
the music receded*

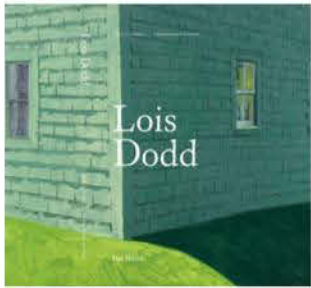
But as in a fairy tale, the child Merwin and his friend “had it on persuasive authority/that the best thing was a dry thorn of the right kind,” which they scour a forest to find. The thorn is not only a subversion of technological innovation—this is a regression, of course—but it will necessarily encode the nonhuman music of the forest, which takes decades or centuries to mature:

*an earthly choir of crickets black-
birds finches
crows jays the breathing of voles
racoons
rabbits foxes the breeze in the
thickets
the thornbushes humming a high
polyphony*

When the boys finally retrieve the magic object and listen “to Beethoven’s Rassoumofsky/quartets echoed from the end of a thorn,” we find that in a very short space Merwin has harmonized the myths of the suffering composer, Christ (the god with the crown of thorns), Philomel (the nightingale who sang her best song with a thorn in her breast), and Orpheus (the poet whose lyre domesticated wild animals and made stones leap up in accompaniment). These ghosts from the history of the art don’t intrude, and you can ignore them, but you can’t ignore that thorn, that intractable thorn, touching down into the musical groove. □

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BORIS LURIE. "Lolita", 1962-1963.

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—Harold Rosenberg, "Bull by the Horns!" (1974) in *NO!art: Pin-Ups, Excrement, Protest, Jew-Art, 1988*



Not Or, 1998, acrylic on paper, 4 1/4" x 9 1/4"

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"My works are improbable combinations of familiar components. The works' titles imply a search, meaning. Their forms refer to animals, plants, tools, grammar and punctuation. Just as energy and entropy are opposites, so are whites and blacks, extremes that transition into each other. Surfaces, marks, and values emerge and submerge. Paper suggests effects of time and natural forces."

—Pamela Blum

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"My works are improbable combinations of familiar components. The works' titles imply a search, meaning. Their forms refer to animals, plants, tools, grammar and punctuation. Just as energy and entropy are opposites, so are whites and blacks, extremes that transition into each other. Surfaces, marks, and values emerge and submerge. Paper suggests effects of time and natural forces."

—Pamela Blum



Michel Delacroix, Grand Paris, 2017, acrylic on canvas, 44" x 24"

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Michel Delacroix: *Le temps retrouvé*
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Through video projection, innovative sound art, interactive digital media, performance, and installation, *Transformer: Native Art in Light and Sound* presents the work of ten artists who reflect on their place in and between traditional and dominant cultures, demonstrating the continuity of indigenous cultures and creativity in the digital age. *Transformer* presents works by Jordan Bennett (Mi'kmaq), Raven Chacon (Diné), Jon Corbett (Métis), Marcella Ernest (Ojibwe), Stephen Foster (Haida), Nicholas Galanin (Tlingit), Julie Nagam (Anishnawbe/Métis), Marianne Nicolson (Kwakwaka'wakw), Keli Mashburn (Osage), and Kevin McKenzie (Cree/Métis). Open Nov. 10, 2017, to Jan. 6, 2019.



Gina Sawin, "Migration" 44 x 50

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Francisco Toledo
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A Hero in His Own Words

David Shulman

No Room for Small Dreams: Courage, Imagination, and the Making of Modern Israel
by Shimon Peres.

Custom House, 227 pp., \$27.99

Arnaldo Momigliano, the great historian of late antiquity, once said: “When I was young, scholars wrote history and gentlemen wrote biography.” Who, then, wrote, or writes, autobiographies? At best, the spiritually tormented and temperamentally restless, like Augustine and Jean-Jacques Rousseau, or great artists such as Pablo Neruda, Nikos Kazantzakis, and Simone de Beauvoir, or adventurers such as Ármín Vámbéry, the Hungarian savant and founder of modern Turkology. At worst, a host of lesser figures, mediocre literati and self-apologists whose names we can happily forget. Somewhere in between these two poles lie women and men who have led unusually interesting lives, some of them, like Shimon Peres, in the public eye as well as in the shadows where consequential decisions are made, for better or for worse. The particular penumbra cast by Peres and described in *No Room for Small Dreams*, a rather slim memoir written shortly before his death last year, reveals, like all penumbras, mixed patches of light and darkness.

The grandiose title—presumably a gesture toward Goethe’s “Dream no small dreams, for they have no power to move the hearts of men”—prepares the reader for the heroic mode in which this book is written; and there is never any doubt about who the hero is. Peres, not a modest man, seems to have been present at every critical junction in the history of Israel, and he has no reluctance about claiming to have provided, at such moments, the (only) voice of reason, daring, and positive vision. This claim is particularly salient in the central chapter, written like a thriller, on the Entebbe raid in 1976, when Israeli soldiers flew to Uganda, killed the hijackers of an Air France jet, and freed their hostages. In these pages Peres’s perennial rival, or nemesis, Yitzhak Rabin, is portrayed as hesitant and supine in contrast with the decisive role of Guess Who.

Occasionally these disclosures come with unconventional meditative reflections. Thus, in the Entebbe chapter, we learn that Peres managed, with great effort, to overcome the despair that had overwhelmed everyone else in the defense establishment about finding a military solution to the hijacking:

Doubt had given way to determination among the group. Even the most skeptical among them refused to let the unlikelihood of a solution prevent them from seeking one out. This was the essential cognitive breakthrough—something I relentlessly attempted to inspire during the most challenging moments of my career. Far too often, especially under stress . . . , we turn inward and close down.

Let us give credit where credit is due. The man was like that. That he made signal contributions to the infant state is incontrovertible. There were also



some terrible mistakes, not exactly accidental. But before we get into that, there is more to be said about the now anachronistic mental world within which this long career took place.

It’s there in every sentence of this book. We find ourselves mired in an endless set of melodramatic crises during which the very existence of the state, and of the Jewish people, always hangs in the balance. This theme is an ancient one, fondly nurtured by the Jews for the last two millennia. The Passover Haggadah says it explicitly: “In every generation they come at us to exterminate us, and the Holy One, Blessed be He, saves us from their hands.” Needless to say, the Jews have good reason to recite these sentences once a year. The problem lies not in the historical record that gives them credibility but in the emotional and cultural investment in the idea, or perhaps the romance, of life on the edge of extinction, and in the political consequences of that idea in a generation for which the threat has vastly diminished, perhaps even disappeared.

There is no existential threat to Israel today apart from the one of our own making. You don’t have to take my word for it; one hears it regularly from Ehud Barak, who ought to know, and he’s hardly alone in the Israeli security establishment in this respect. However, the danger of our own making may well suffice to finish us off. Benjamin Netanyahu loses no opportunity to scream to the world that Israel is on the brink of catastrophe; without such certainty, his entire inner world would probably collapse. Israel does, of course, have enemies, as do other states. It’s the narrative of continuous, and somehow delectable, do-or-die romance that needs to be examined or, rather, superseded by something better.

For it is one thing to say that the Jews needed, and probably still need, a state,

and that the history of the first half of the twentieth century proved this theorem; or, simply stated, that the early Zionist analysis of what lay in store for the Jews of Europe was unfortunately all too right, and a real and practical solution was urgently required. It is another thing to claim, as voices both inside and outside the Israeli government do frequently, that the Zionist enterprise necessarily involved the subjugation, disenfranchisement, and potential expulsion of that other people still living on their lands to the west of the Jordan River. Peres, let it be said, did not share the latter view. But he lived inside, indeed in some sense embodied, the romantic tale of Jewish rebirth, including some of the darker aspects of that tale.

Meanwhile, the Israeli appropriation of Palestinian land on the West Bank proceeds apace: in Area C alone—the approximately 60 percent of the West Bank under full Israeli legal and military control—well over half of all land reserves have by now been either settled by Israelis or earmarked for future settlement.¹ Netanyahu has recently proclaimed that these settlements are there “for all eternity.” It’s still possible that eternity will turn out to be shorter than expected, but each passing day pushes Israel further toward either South African-style full-fledged apartheid in the occupied territories or, eventually, a single state with a Palestinian majority. Sometimes, like many of my activist friends, I think the latter possibility, or some form of confeder-

¹The tripartite division of the West Bank was part of the interim agreements between Israel and the Palestinians under the Oslo accords. Area A is (at least nominally) under exclusive Palestinian control. Area B is a mixed zone, with Palestinian management of civil matters but security in the hands of the Israeli army. Area C is under total Israeli military and political control.

ated system, is the best we can hope for. But in either case, we have the end of the democratic, self-contained, and independent Jewish state. As Peres says toward the end of his book, “The future of the Zionist project depends on our embrace of the two-state solution.”

He didn’t always think so. Peres is one of the handful of Israeli politicians and public figures who were able to change their minds about something important (the former president Ezer Weizman was another). I once heard Leah Rabin, Yitzhak Rabin’s widow, insist in a public lecture that her late husband had never even once changed his mind about anything, as if that were a great human virtue. Inhabiting a mythic cosmos tends to reduce reality to a manageable set of indubitable equations. It was within just such a mental world that Peres lent his weight, as minister of defense in Rabin’s government, to the creation of some of the first Israeli settlements in the West Bank.

This happened during the Hanukkah holiday of 1975, when a group of messianic-mystical Israeli nationalists, known at that time as Gush Emunim, took over the old Turkish railway station at Sebastia in the north-central West Bank and declared it liberated Jewish territory. Peres flew in by helicopter and told the would-be settlers they would have to leave until the government decided on the conditions of their settling there. In the next few days, in the face of considerable resistance from Rabin, among others, Peres was instrumental in negotiating those conditions, still remembered as the “Sebastia compromise.”

That was the beginning. Initially, twenty-five families were allowed to take up residence inside the nearby military base at Kadum, which developed into what is today the large settlement of Kedumim. Other early settlements, such as Elon Moreh and Ofra, as well as Jewish nuclei in and around the city of Hebron, soon popped up, and the legal ploy of releasing so-called state lands in the occupied territories for Jewish settlement, sanctioned at first by the military courts and then by the Supreme Court, became standard practice.² Today the West Bank is dotted with many hundreds of such settlements, which remain the primary obstacle to any possible agreement between Palestinians and Israelis. All of these settlements are illegal under international law, and many of them—those not sanctioned by explicit government decisions—are illegal under Israeli law, not that this matters much in practice. It was Peres who let that dark genie out of the bottle. Many settlers still remember him planting a tree at Ofra in the early days, and he was actively involved at that time in planning other, now long-established settlements as well.

Not surprisingly, Peres makes no reference to the Kadum episode in his book. Perhaps remorse was not in his repertoire. A well-known Hebrew

²See my “Occupation: ‘The Finest Israeli Documentary,’” *The New York Review*, May 22, 2014.

poet who, as a ranking officer in the reserves, was present at the crucial moment in Sebastia became, willy-nilly, part of the notorious compromise. I've heard him say that he can't forgive himself for his minor part in what happened. There's no doubt in my mind as to who was the more honest man. But Peres tells us that he always preferred to think forward, toward the future, rather than backward. In those days, when the ornithological metaphor still dominated public discourse in Israel, he was a self-proclaimed hawk, and he saw the new settlements as "the roots and the eyes of Israel."³

Gradually, something changed in him. By late 1982, five years after Menachem Begin led the Israeli right to power, Peres was capable of joining the enormous Peace Now demonstration in Tel Aviv following the first Lebanon war and the Sabra and Shatila massacre on the outskirts of Beirut. Ten years later he was one of the architects of the Oslo agreements between Israel and the PLO and, as such, was vilified and physically threatened by fanatics on the right. In those days, the Oslo process seemed to many of us to be the way to a resolution of the Palestinian-Israeli conflict, promising two independent states living side by side in peace.

In between, there was a disastrous fiasco, one of the defining moments in Peres's career, though it was not his fault. He tells the story simply and convincingly. In April 1987, when Peres was foreign minister in Yitzhak Shamir's government, he initiated a meeting in London with Jordan's King Hussein. To Peres's surprise, Hussein was amenable to negotiating a peace treaty with Israel: "I excitedly recognized a man who was gazing to the future with optimism and hope." A draft agreement quickly emerged; as its core element, Jordan would resume control of the West Bank and would represent Palestinian national interests, thus putting an immediate end to the Israeli occupation. As Peres says, in bitter retrospection:

Not only did [the proposed agreement] create a path to peace with the Jordanians, it resolved the Palestinian question without requiring Israel to relinquish any of its territory or to change the status of Jerusalem.

"Any of its territory" refers to Israel within the Green Line—that is, the pre-1967 borders plus greater Jerusalem.

Shamir, an inflexible hard-liner committed to the already obsolete notion of Greater Israel—an Israel that included all the land west of the Jordan—squashed the deal, and we are still living with the consequences. Indeed, Shamir's blind rejection of the very possibility of resolving the conflict provided a model for Israel's continuing refusal, from 2001 to the present, even to consider what is known as the Arab Peace Initiative (or the Saudi plan), which is based on the idea of a complete regional peace in exchange for an Israeli retreat from the territories. Given the choice between holding on to the land and making peace, the right-wing Israeli governments of the last decades have consistently chosen the former.

³See Yossi Beilin, "The Transformation of Shimon Peres," *Foreign Affairs*, July 24, 2014.

There is thus a great sadness (also a certain ennui) in reading this book. Things could have turned out differently. In 1996, in the first election after Rabin's assassination, Peres—who had taken over as prime minister—lost to Netanyahu by a mere 30,000 votes, a negligible percentage of those cast. Had he won... But maybe we shouldn't think that thought. He eventually went on to become a rather successful president of the state (2007–2014), certainly a vast improvement over his predecessor, Moshe Katsav, who went to jail for rape.

But the vision Peres had sought to enact eluded him. He believed in peace as an attainable and necessary option, and he went some way toward structuring the contours of that future peace. He faced huge difficulties on both sides of the conflict; but in the end it was

doesn't lend itself to penetrating visions of truth.

On a deeper level, we might speak of the clash of two seemingly incompatible views. On the one hand, there is the old heroic myth, still embedded in the story the Israeli mainstream likes to tell itself: a weak and persecuted nation (if that is what we are) rose from the ashes to achieve its freedom, by sheer force of will, against inconceivably harsh odds. On the other hand, there is the awareness of our share in the endless violence and wickedness, including the subjugation of another people, and of what needs to be done in order to achieve even a semblance of normalcy and decency in the real world.

The first view, which reflects a real-enough piece of the historical picture, blithely ignores the always latent pathol-



Shimon Peres at a celebration of Mimouna, which marks the end of Passover and the return to eating leavened foods, Jerusalem, 1981

the marked rightward shift within the Israeli electorate and the tremendous violence unleashed in the second intifada that blocked his hopes. The Israeli peace camp dwindled to insignificance as the patently false but convenient notion that there was no Palestinian partner struck deep roots. That notion is still dominant today, a self-fulfilling illusion beloved of Israeli prime ministers from both right and center and, by now, of the Israeli street. Maybe the roots were always there, only waiting to come back to life.

Does this history make Peres into a tragic figure, as S. Yizhar, the great inventor of modern Hebrew prose, used to say? Yizhar's most famous story, "Khirbet Khiz'a," published shortly after the 1948 war, tells of the expulsion of innocent Palestinian villagers by soldiers of the new Jewish state. Yizhar himself witnessed such events during the war. His story was for many years a canonical text in Israeli high schools (not anymore). Later, he was elected to the Knesset and knew Peres well. In his words, "There was something tragic within him, a measure of Job without the mentality of Job."

That's one way to put it. But it somehow makes Peres, a hyperactive politician if ever there was one, into a victim, as if he were not himself the instrument of his fate. I think he lacked the single most important attribute of a tragic hero: the insight into reality won by facing terrible mental pain. He was an optimist, and habitual optimism, mostly a rather shallow thing,

ogy of modern nationalism, now present in florid form in Israel (as in many other modern nation-states). There is also the question as to whether the tremendous violence inflicted on Palestinians by the state-in-the-making was and has remained intrinsic to the entire Zionist enterprise. The second view moves toward a necessarily symbiotic relation between Israeli Jews and Palestinians and sees this principle of mutual responsibility as the only acceptable direction for the whole story—indeed, in some nontrivial sense, as its *raison d'être*.

There is, perhaps, a generational aspect to this dichotomy. Members of my generation in the peace movement may feel some residual nostalgia for the imaginative world of Peres and a real sympathy for his ultimately quixotic travails. My younger activist friends tend to see him primarily as an unwitting architect of a state that has morphed into the monstrous dystopia of Netanyahu and his cronies.

Again and again in the pages of Peres's book, we get the old-new romance in one form or another. Israel, we are told, has the best, the most intrepid army in the world, as well as the most high-tech start-ups per capita, the second-highest number of foreign firms (after China) listed on the Nasdaq exchange, the greatest scientists—the inventors of the USB drive, of GPS, and of other emergent wonders of nanotechnology—and also (even more to the point) the most idealistic and talented young people on the globe, and so on (and on). The state is altogether a miracle; Israeli realism, Peres never tires of telling us, quoting his mentor David

Ben-Gurion, means making the impossible real. It was once a captivating and occasionally persuasive dream.

And indeed there is much to be proud of. I, too, am sometimes proud of my country. About idealism, Peres could be right: probably few know that Israel has well over five hundred ordinary people who are on constant call to drive Palestinians—the lucky ones who manage to get permits to go for medical treatment in Israel—from Gaza to the hospitals and back. Without these drivers, there is no way such severely ill people could reach their doctors. Here, one might say, is a Jewish act in the old style.

However, it just happens that this same miraculous state, for all its selfless idealists, is maintaining one of the last true colonial regimes in the world; that its public spaces are poisoned by an atavistic racism, its leaders driven by a mean-hearted, self-righteous tribalism; that its minister of justice, or injustice, Ayelet Shaked, has recently announced that the paltry excuse of elementary human rights will never be allowed to get in the way of the nation's maximalist goals; that its minister of culture and sport, Miri Regev, is doing whatever she can to stamp out criticism and dissent of any kind, the lifeblood of cultural creativity; that its army has spent the last several decades as a police force in territories that belong to another people, its main task being to ensure that the land grab can go on undisturbed. Perhaps the most bitter irony in Peres's book is its disingenuous dedication: "To the next generation of leaders, in Israel and around the world." Israel has never had so contemptible, so morally corrupt, and so shortsighted a leadership, and sadly in this respect it is far from alone in today's world.

Let's take a leaf from Peres's own book and peer around the corner. For over two and a half decades, the bulk of the traumatized Palestinian population in the territories (over four million people) dreamed the dream of an independent Palestine comprising the West Bank and Gaza, as all the reliable studies and surveys have shown. This dream has been shattered by Israel's remorseless annexationist policies and by the profound reluctance of its extreme right-wing governments to make even the slightest move toward peace. The latest polls from Palestine show a dramatic loss of faith in the present moderate leadership in Ramallah, although, remarkably, 43 percent of those polled still seem to believe in the possibility of a Palestinian state.

But already one can hear the beginning notes of a chorus that may eventually drown out most other voices in the territories. If there is to be no peace between the two states west of the Jordan River, then, as Palestinian President Mahmoud Abbas said in his speech at the UN in September, "Neither you [the peoples of the world], nor we, will have any other choice but to continue the struggle and demand full, equal rights for all inhabitants of historic Palestine." Indeed, the struggle for basic rights within a single binational state has already begun. Israeli activists, having despaired of a solution based on radical separation, will certainly join in. It will look something like the anti-apartheid struggle in South Africa or the American civil rights movement, and sooner or later, at whatever cost, we will win. □

Micha Bur-Am/Magnum Photos

Black Saints and Sinners

Brandon Harris

Five-Carat Soul

by James McBride.
Riverhead, 308 pp., \$27.00

The Five-Carat Soul Bottom Bone Band doesn't play much music in James McBride's first collection of short stories, *Five-Carat Soul*. One never gets a sense of what kind of outfit these young Negro boys—Butter, Goat, Beanie, Bunny, and Dex—might be. Are they closer to the Jackson 5 or the early Beatles or the musicians in the 2013 documentary *A Band Called Death*? McBride is more interested in the aspects of their lives that intervene in their careers: tales of children who never returned from Vietnam and others who might escape on track-and-field scholarships, fights over naked pictures of missing mothers, or double-murder trials like the one imposed on an innocent-seeming, portly child named Blub, who might have turned out okay if only he hadn't suffered a broken heart too young.

The story of the band's members and the community that raises them is narrated by Butter, about whom we don't learn much. McBride, a celebrated musician as well as an author, steers away from the potentially fascinating collaborations among these young boys—the stuff that made up almost all of Colson Whitehead's ravishing *Sag Harbor* (2009), for instance—and toward their fates as black children of the working poor in the era just before extreme wealth stratification, mass incarceration, and deindustrialization criminalized many of these people and took away their hope. In this uneven but rewarding collection, I could have used more of his insights into the intricate details of his characters' lives and fewer generalizations about their fates: a more nuanced intermingling, for example, of Butter's flowering self-consciousness and his burgeoning awareness of what it meant to come from a Uniontown, Pennsylvania, slum referred to as "The Bottom."

When we first meet the band—comprised of middle-school-aged black children—they have just had their most recent rehearsal interrupted by the sound of gunshots from the street below. McBride's writing captures moments like this in a matter-of-fact and somewhat gleefully comic register that could seem incompatible with the scene but ultimately isn't. It is the mid-1970s, and the economy is grim; the steel mills and factories have closed, spelling the long decline of this part of the country where Appalachia meets the rust belt. Black communities here, which are rarely depicted in books and films noticed by people on the coasts, have been hit as hard as white ones.

McBride adopts Butter's southwestern Pennsylvania Negro dialect with verisimilitude and ease, and the section of his book set in the Bottom is both intimate and wide-ranging, poignant and oblique. Setting up and bringing off an ironic conclusion is among McBride's greatest gifts as a writer. But when his

material doesn't present an opportunity to wield that gift deftly, this strategy can sometimes feel a bit pat.

"Buck Boy," the book's second story, ought to build to great emotional power and never quite does. Its ending—an affirmation of a central character's basic decency—fails to make good on the climactic resolution it appears to be building toward. Buck Boy Robinson, a young black man of seventeen or so, lies dead on the street, a fistful of dollars in one hand and a knife in the other. Mr. Woo, the Asian gro-

when other young people were killed by police or raped and murdered by family members, there was no community outcry, "but Buck Boy, who robbed a school bus and tried to rob Mr. Woo, he's a hero now."

The Robinsons are a sorry lot, perhaps even poorer than the average citizens of the Bottom. The story introduces us to a community where those who profit from outrage are often the last to care about the dead; Buck Boy's mother takes the \$4,000 in donations that Jenkins has raised for the funeral, pockets it, and chooses to bury her son in a cheap pine box, angering the

who can climb into Mr. Woo's soul and figure out why an Asian immigrant in a black neighborhood in the middle of the 1970s in an increasingly failing America would pay for the casket of the young black man who tried to rob him.

But McBride inhabits a satisfying variety of first- and third-person voices in these tales, from middle-aged Jewish train-set collectors to preteen Negro child artists. This mélange of perspectives frees him to set up moments of unexpected levity and grace, such as Mr. Woo's odd generosity in the face of guilt. McBride does this without going outside the bounds of "respectability

politics" as it is practiced in the speeches of President Barack Obama at Morehouse or the entire political career of Colin Powell. And that's okay too, I suppose. *Five-Carat Soul* might not transcend the political imagination of McBride's generation of black American thought leaders in a way that is pleasing to millennials seeking a bolder vision of both a black American past and future, but it still manages to examine the contradictions, salient beauties, and lasting tragedies of the American Negro experience in a way that will resonate broadly.

McBride has often mined grim circumstance for gallows humor. His novel *Song Yet Sung* (2008) is a tale of fugitive slavery featuring a female protagonist that is much funnier than Colson Whitehead's much more celebrated *The Underground*

Railroad (in which Whitehead for the first time kept his own phantasmagorical comedic sensibility under wraps in pursuit of Oprahfied seriousness). McBride's previous work of fiction, *The Good Lord Bird* (2013), a tragicomic rumination on the life of John Brown, won the National Book Award in part for its ability to look at the darkest chapters of American history and crack a smile.

Narrated by an androgynous black child born into slavery who is kidnapped by Brown and mistaken for a little girl, *The Good Lord Bird* is a crowd-pleasing picaresque in which Brown comes off as a figure by turns absurd and magnetic, foolish and prophetic. No place or person escapes McBride's comic sensibility unscathed, from northern abolitionists to proslavery Missourians. Frederick Douglass, who often comes off as egotistical and boorish, lashes out at the child for calling him by a shortened version of his first name: "Don't you know you are not addressing a pork chop, but rather a fairly considerable and incorrigible piece of the American Negro diaspora?"

McBride cut his teeth as a journalist in the 1980s and early 1990s at *The Boston Globe* and *The Washington Post*. He came to prominence in 1995 with his best-selling memoir *The Color of Water*, which was billed as a tribute to his white mother, the former Ruchel Dwajra Zylska. She raised James and his eleven siblings in housing projects under a cloak of secrecy, pretending to be a light-skinned black woman and telling him little about



James McBride, New York City, 2012

cer who killed him during an apparent robbery, instantly becomes an object of fascination for ambulance-chasing news reporters from nearby Morgantown, West Virginia, and a target of ire for the Reverend Hillary Jenkins, a loud-dressing religious huckster masquerading as a "community leader" who, according to Butter, is never far off "whenever there's a fresh-cooked chicken or a television camera around."

A controversy ensues, the type that seems more common today than it would have been in the 1970s, before body cameras and Ta-Nehisi Coates, performative wokeness and Internet callout culture—even if today's Copwatch network is but another iteration of what the Black Panthers were formed to do in the first place and jackleg black preachers are still a dime a dozen. Jenkins starts a protest march that initially draws only forty people or so in front of the store. Soon, however, according to Butter, "a bunch of white people come from town and from all the big towns around show up wearing T-shirts that say CARAO, which means Coalition Against Racism and something."

Mr. Woo goes into hiding temporarily, and his store is closed. This chagrins the band greatly; their gear is locked in the space above Mr. Woo's, and they can retrieve it only when his store is open. The young men of the Five-Carat Soul Bottom Bone Band all knew Buck Boy and, like almost everyone else in the community, didn't think much of him. Butter informs us ruefully that

throng of mourners who gathered for the funeral she skipped. According to Butter's sister, a friend to the sister of the deceased, Buck Boy's mother "bought a brand-new refrigerator plus a giant TV set and some new couches." Mr. Woo, who is first to the gravesite at the end of the story, springs for a better casket for the man he killed.

Wouldn't it be nice if the deaths of so many troubled young black men were greeted with such benevolence by the perpetrators of their demise in the America in which James McBride has woven this fictional, hard-to-believe but hard-to-deny 1970s Negro slum? I'm sure I'm not the only person who will leave this book hoping so and knowing, having been a living American Negro for over three decades now, that such a future is a pipe dream. McBride never considers what it would require to build the kind of social reality that would permit acts of empathy like Mr. Woo's, or what it would take for blacks to have the economic self-determination, personal safety, and political agency that would make such deaths rare—either among colored folks in southwestern Pennsylvania four decades ago or on the streets of Ferguson, Cleveland, Staten Island, Charleston, Milwaukee, Baton Rouge, St. Paul, or Cincinnati today.

Surely some of that can be pegged on the narrator. The centerpiece suite of stories in *Five-Carat Soul*, the four-part tale of the Five-Carat Soul Bottom Bone Band of which "Buck Boy" is the first entry, lacks an omniscient figure

Chia Messina

her past as a runaway. The daughter of an Orthodox rabbi from Poland, she was abused by her father after they fled from pogroms in Central Europe to the American South, where they faced discrimination anew. She converted to Christianity after moving to New York and marrying a black preacher, the Reverend Andrew D. McBride, who died of cancer months before his only son with Ruchel, who later changed her name to Ruth McBride Jordan, was born.

McBride grew up in the projects of Red Hook, Brooklyn, which became the setting for the second of two underwhelming films he wrote for Spike Lee, *Red Hook Summer* (2012). The first of those films, *Miracle at St. Anna* (2008), is based on McBride's 2002 debut novel. It tells the story of the Buffalo Soldiers of the 92nd Infantry Division, who took refuge in a small Tuscan village during the later stages of World War II. They suffered great casualties on August 12, 1944, at Sant'Anna di Stazzema, where the Waffen-SS and the Brigade Nere massacred nearly six hundred residents and refugees, including over a hundred children, in what has been widely viewed as a war crime.

Both of McBride's collaborations with Lee suffer from problems that have more to do with the mechanics of filmmaking and the difficulties of adaptation than the quality of their writing. McBride has long been preoccupied with the stories of black soldiers and with the ways in which black identity is often bound up in the machinations of the American war machine. The specter of wartime, or the forgotten accoutrements of it, appear in almost every story in *Five-Carat Soul*, from "The Under Graham Railroad Box Car Set," about a savvy train collector who attempts to pry a priceless, one-of-a-kind train set that once belonged to the son of Robert E. Lee away from a religious black couple who have little idea how valuable it is, to "The Fish Man Angel," in which Abraham Lincoln grapples with the death of his son Willie during a late-night visit to Willie's pony. "Father Abe" centers on a recently freed ex-slave child of mixed parentage who lives in a colored orphanage converted from a former munitions factory and convinces himself that he is Lincoln's son, knowing nothing of Lincoln's grief.

The story of the 92nd Infantry is recapitulated in "The Christmas Dance." Herb, a Ph.D. candidate at Columbia in the mid-1970s, is trying to glean from two tight-lipped, battle-scarred veterans just what took place when the 92nd Infantry was attacked by Germans in the Belgian Ardennes. An army intelligence report refers to the episode as a "skirmish," but when Herb notices that fifty-three of seventy soldiers from the 92nd Division's colored 366th Regiment were killed, he knows something is fishy. The elegant, mayor-like Judge, a savvy politician and community leader, walks with a cane and used to sit on the bench, but plays numbers like any common street Negro. He answers Herb's questions readily at first, but as Herb begins to pry he makes himself less available. Over lunch at Sylvia's—back when they still served their food on trays, buffet-style—Judge introduces Herb to Carlos, a Puerto Rican who works at the post office and lives a

relatively bleak existence in a small tenement on 147th Street. He too proves unwilling to reckon honestly with the horrors of the past.

In stories like this and "Father Abe" McBride articulates how sacrifice in military service has rarely allowed black Americans to win the full benefits of the American project, an edifice for which they can be bricklayers but never equity holders. Here is where we find McBride at his most interesting as both an aesthete and a "race man," as a writer of sparkling sentences and a courier of social truths that remain obscured by the all-too-unexamined faith our white countrymen have in the nation's founding ideals. "Father Abe," one of the briefest stories in the



Devan Shimoyama: Shape Up and a Trim, 2017; from the exhibition 'Fictions,' on view at the Studio Museum in Harlem through January 7, 2018. Shimoyama's work is also on view in 'Sweet,' a solo exhibition at the De Buck Gallery, New York City, through December 9, 2017.

book, climaxes with the desertion of a black sergeant, Abe Porter, whose white commander is more interested in a passing appearance by a soon-to-be-assassinated Republican president than in the child for whose freedom he and his men have recently risked their lives. He refers to the boy as "contraband."

When the commander saunters back into the darkness on the other end of the encampment, the Negro soldiers can go back to speaking freely. The language blacks use to articulate their own existential crises often comes out wrong when a white authority figure is around to gaslight them, or simply to misunderstand. We see this quandary again and again in McBride's stories, from wartime Virginia to Nixon-era Pennsylvania to the gates of hell: the collection's oddest and least satisfying story, "The Moaning Bench," concerns a recently deceased boxer, Rachman Babatunde, who must fight both for his soul and for those of some cornfed white folks he gets to know while waiting for his judgment. The characterizations drift toward pastiche in a way that is unbecoming in the high-wire death's waiting room story, but McBride doesn't lose sight of his thematic panacea. The problem never comes through more powerfully than in the moment of realization Abe Porter has

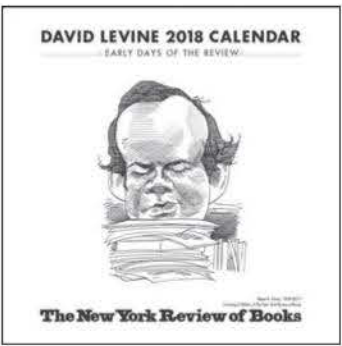
while he speaks to his regiment of the legacy that awaits the Negro dead of the Civil War versus that of their white countrymen:

"Something's been digging at me ever since they told us this war is winding down," he said. "I come to thinking. About Yancy Miles, and Irving Gooden, and Linwood Sims, God rest their souls. I come to wonder about their deliverance, and about what God wants. Not for them. For us, who has fought under other men's rulings and is not yet gone from labor to reward. Who among us is gonna remember them? Yancy, with his cussing self, and Linwood, who could sing so good, and Irving and his brother Zeke, and all the rest of the colored who's deadened in these fields. The white folks'll know theirs, won't they? They'll write songs for 'em, and raise flags for 'em, and put 'em up in books the way they know how. But ain't nobody but God gonna give more than a handful of feed to the ones of us who died out here fighting for our freedom. And what is that anyway?"

Four generations later, the colored soldiers in "The Christmas Dance" who helped liberate Europe are grappling with the missing legacy of their own war dead, forgotten deaths that only yield talk of light "skirmishes," deaths absent from the parade of medals and ballyhoo about honor and the American way that the pallid believers hold fast to. Yet these men remain suspicious of those—like young, earnest Herb—who promise to set the story straight. In part, this is because they are doing their best to make amends for their own behavior in the ethically challenging theater of war in which their adulthoods were forged. This is something Herb cannot be trusted with right away. Like all scholars or investigative journalists, he has to earn the right to hear the truth first. It takes some time. Eventually Herb does get Carlos to talk, since he is the one with less to lose and a bigger hole in his heart to fill.

Judge and Carlos were complicit in the death of a friend of theirs, Clifford Johns, and several other American soldiers. In an incident the US government would rather forget, Johns ordered his fellow troops to fire artillery rounds on himself and his comrades, knowing that this would kill an even larger number of Germans. The penance Carlos and Judge devised for themselves, one that binds them together despite their very different lives and circumstances, is to keep a vow Clifford made to his wife Lillian in a letter found on his body after the "skirmish." The two men, the celebrated black judge and the lowly Puerto Rican postman, meet every December 24 with Lillian to partake in the annual "Christmas dance" she had been promised. That dance had been taken from her because her husband believed in the mission of a country that never loved him. But those he left behind in it might grow to love themselves, and dance in memory of their dead, as American Negroes have long done, regardless of whose boot was on their throat.

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Let Them Buy Cake

David Cole

When David Mullins and Charlie Craig walked into Masterpiece Cakeshop, a bakery in Denver, Colorado, five years ago, they had no inkling that the encounter would take them to the United States Supreme Court. All they wanted was a wedding cake. But as soon as Jack Phillips, the bakery's owner, realized that the marriage they were celebrating was their own, he cut off the conversation, explaining that he would not make any cake for a same-sex wedding. They never even discussed what the cake would look like or say, because Phillips made it clear that his policy was absolute. The bakery has turned away several other same-sex couples on the same grounds, including a lesbian couple who wanted to buy cupcakes for a commitment ceremony. Phillips claims that because he objects to same-sex unions on religious grounds, and because his cakes are a form of expression, he has a First Amendment right to refuse to sell them to gay couples for their wedding receptions.

When they were turned away, Mullins and Craig brought a complaint before the Colorado Civil Rights Commission, which enforces the state's public accommodations law. That law, which dates back to 1885, requires businesses open to the public to treat their customers equally. (Forty-five states have a similar law, as does the federal government.) Since 2008, Colorado has specifically prohibited businesses from discriminating against customers on the basis of sexual orientation, in addition to disability, race, creed, color, sex, marital status, national origin, and ancestry. The commission found that by selling wedding cakes to straight couples but refusing to sell them to gay couples, the bakery had violated the public accommodations law. The Colorado courts upheld that decision, rejecting the bakery's First Amendment objections—as have courts hearing similar cases involving florists, banquet halls, photographers, and videographers. In June, however, despite the unanimity among the lower courts, the Supreme Court agreed to hear the bakery's appeal.

The case will be argued on December 5. (The ACLU represents Craig and Mullins, and I am co-counsel in the case.) It asks whose rights should prevail when the First Amendment's guarantees of freedom of religion, speech, and association come into conflict with equality—over a cake, no less. It is one of the most talked-about cases of the term, in part because it's so easy to conjure hypothetical variations: What if the cake includes the message “God bless this union”? What if a wedding photographer, who has to be present at the ceremony in order to provide her services, objects to same-sex marriage? Should bakeries or photographers be permitted to refuse their services to an interracial or interfaith couple? Could a bakery refuse to make a birthday cake for a black family because its owner objects to celebrating black lives?

The Masterpiece Cakeshop dispute is at the center of a new front in the clash between opponents and proponents of marriage equality. Even before the Supreme Court declared in 2015 that same-sex couples have a constitutional right to be married on the same terms as different-sex couples, opponents of marriage equality had begun invoking their own First Amendment rights, claiming that they should not have to do anything to support unions that are contrary to their sincere beliefs. This controversy is not limited to same-sex weddings. If the Court accepts the bakery's arguments,

that “private discrimination may be characterized as a form of exercising freedom of association protected by the First Amendment,” but ruled that such discrimination “has never been accorded affirmative constitutional protections.”² And in 1984, when a corporate law firm objected that a requirement to consider a woman for partner would interfere with its First Amendment rights to speak and associate, the Court once again rejected the contention, stating that there is “no constitutional right to discriminate.”³ As Justice Sandra Day O'Connor explained in yet another case rejecting a

liefs are “legitimate.” As a result, a constitutional religious exemption would free any business owner who framed his objection in religious terms from an obligation to treat his customers equally. As Justice Antonin Scalia wrote for the Court in rejecting a free exercise claim in 1990, laws of general applicability “could not function” if they were subject to such religious challenges. Quoting an 1878 decision, Scalia warned that such an exemption would “permit every citizen to become a law unto himself.”⁵

Masterpiece Cakeshop's objection rests on its owner's Christian beliefs. And its complaint is ultimately a desire not to be associated with a same-sex couple's wedding celebration; it objected to selling Craig and Mullins even a nondescript cake. But because the Supreme Court has flatly rejected both association- and religion-based claims in such cases already, the bakery stresses that it is making a free speech claim. It maintains that it speaks through its cakes, which should make this case different.

The reasons for rejecting exemptions based on religion and association, however, are equally applicable to free speech claims. Because almost any conduct can be engaged in for “expressive” purposes, the exceptions would very quickly swallow the rule. As the Supreme Court has recognized, “it is possible to find some kernel of expression in almost every activity a person undertakes.”⁶ Any business

that uses creative or artisanal skills to produce something that communicates in some way could claim an exemption. A law firm, which provides its services entirely through words, could refuse to serve black clients. Photographs are undeniably expressive, so a commercial photography studio could post a sign saying it takes pictures only of men if it objected to depicting women. A sign-painting business whose owner objects to immigration could refuse to provide signs to Latino-owned businesses.

Likening its cakes to the art of Jackson Pollock and Piet Mondrian, Masterpiece Cakeshop claims that they deserve protection as free speech no less than Pollock's canvases. But whether the cakes are artistic is beside the point. As an individual artist, Pollock would not have been subject to a public accommodations law and could have chosen his customers. But if he had opened a commercial art studio to the public, he, too, would have been barred from refusing to sell a painting because a customer was black, female, disabled, or gay.

The fact that a business's products may be expressive does not give it the right to discriminate. Newspapers and book publishers, for example, are



it will open a potentially gaping loophole in all laws governing businesses that provide “expressive” products or services.

The Trump administration has filed a friend-of-the-court brief supporting the bakery, the first time in history that the solicitor general has supported a constitutional exemption from an antidiscrimination law. One of the Justice Department's principal responsibilities is to enforce public accommodations and antidiscrimination laws, so it is generally skeptical of arguments for allowing citizens to evade their strictures. But not this administration, at least not when what's at issue is a religious objection to selling a cake to a same-sex couple.

Businesses have raised First Amendment objections to antidiscrimination laws in the past, but the Supreme Court has always rejected them. In 1968, the Court dismissed as “patently frivolous” a South Carolina restaurant chain's argument that serving black customers “interfere[d] with the ‘free exercise of [its] religion.’”¹ Five years later, when private racially segregated schools opposed a prohibition on racial discrimination in admissions, asserting that it violated their freedom of association, the Court acknowledged

First Amendment exemption from an antidiscrimination law:

The Constitution does not guarantee a right to choose employees, customers, suppliers, or those with whom one engages in simple commercial transactions, without restraint from the State.... A shopkeeper has no constitutional right to deal only with persons of one sex.⁴

If the courts were to recognize a First Amendment exemption to such general regulations of commercial conduct, it would render antidiscrimination laws, and many other business regulations, unenforceable in many settings. Consider the First Amendment right of association. Any prohibition on discrimination can be characterized as a requirement to associate with those with whom one would rather not associate. The Court must choose between the two, and its choice has been clear since *Brown v. Board of Education* declared segregation unconstitutional.

Religious exemptions are also generally incompatible with antidiscrimination laws. Beyond asking whether a religious belief is sincere, the courts have no way to measure whether religious be-

²Norwood v. Harrison, 1973.

³Hishon v. King & Spalding, 1984.

⁴Roberts v. United States Jaycees, 1984.

⁵Employment Division, Department of Human Resources of Oregon v. Smith, 1990.

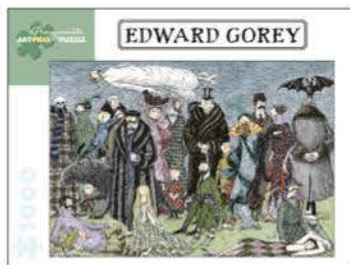
⁶City of Dallas v. Stanglin, 1989.

¹Newman v. Piggie Park Enterprises, Inc., 1968.

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indisputably engaged in core First Amendment activity, but that does not mean that they can refuse to sell to (or hire) Mormons or women. As the Supreme Court stated in 1945, "The fact that the publisher handles news while others handle food does not... afford the publisher a peculiar constitutional sanctuary in which he can with impunity violate laws regulating his business practices."⁷ If newspapers can be required not to discriminate, then surely bakeries can as well—no matter how artistic their confections may be.

The reason First Amendment objections have failed in these cases is that the laws in question are not in any way targeted at expression. A law forbidding employment discrimination, for example, applies regardless of whether a business is expressive, like a newspaper, or not, like a hardware store. The same is true for public accommodations laws. By contrast, a law requiring newspapers to print replies to editorials would be directed at the content of the newspaper's speech and would violate the First Amendment. Because public accommodations laws do not target speech or its content, they should survive First Amendment challenges.

The Supreme Court has recognized a First Amendment objection to public accommodations laws on only two occasions, but both cases involved efforts by states to regulate the speech of private ideological associations, not the conduct of businesses open to the public. In 1995, the Court ruled that Massachusetts could not use its public accommodations law to require the private organizers of Boston's annual St. Patrick's Day parade to allow a gay pride contingent to march under its own banner.⁸ The parade organizers were open to gay marchers, but objected to an openly gay contingent carrying its own banner. The Court reasoned that a parade is an inherently expressive activity, and that by requiring the organizers to include a gay pride banner, the state was "alter[ing] the content" of the parade's message. Similarly, in 2000, the Court ruled that New Jersey could not require the Boy Scouts to accept an openly gay Scout leader, because doing so directly interfered with the Boy Scouts' First Amendment right to choose leaders who did not undermine the group's mission.⁹

Masterpiece Cakeshop invokes these cases, but they are plainly different. The St. Patrick's Day parade organizers and the Boy Scouts are private groups that exist for the purpose of communicating ideas, not businesses serving the public in the commercial marketplace. Private organizations engaged in speech have a First Amendment right to choose their messages and their leaders. Businesses open to

the public, by contrast, have no right to choose their customers.

But, some ask, what if a couple requested a cake bearing a written message? Surely the law should not require the bakery to write "Congratulations on your wedding" if the baker does not in fact feel congratulatory. And doesn't every wedding cake implicitly say just that? The problem with this question is its premise—namely, that if a business's conduct is sufficiently expressive, it earns the right to discriminate against its customers based on race, sex, sexual orientation, or other grounds.

Under Colorado law, as under most public accommodations laws, a bakery can decline to place any messages on a cake that it finds offensive, as long as that policy applies to all customers and is not a pretext for discrimination on the basis of identity. What it cannot do is refuse to provide to a gay couple the very same product that it will sell to a straight couple. In this case, moreover, Masterpiece Cakeshop refused to provide even a nondescript cake if it was to be used for a reception celebrating a same-sex couple's wedding. What triggered the objection was the identity of the customers, not any requested message. In fact, Craig and Mullins did not request a message at all.

Masterpiece Cakeshop's effort to carve out a First Amendment exemption to an antidiscrimination law that on its face does not target speech would require the Court to depart from its general approach to similar claims. The Court has consistently ruled that when a generally applicable law is not targeted at a constitutional right, the fact that it incidentally affects the right does not invalidate the law. A law prohibiting the use of peyote by all citizens is not invalid because it impedes the ability of certain Native Americans to use peyote in their religious rituals. Similarly, the fact that a preference granted to veterans who apply for civil service jobs has the incidental effect of disadvantaging female applicants is not a denial of equal protection.

Only laws that target religion, or that are intended to deny equal treatment to a protected class, trigger heightened scrutiny under the First Amendment's religion clause and the Equal Protection clause. In a pluralist society, it is inevitable that many generally applicable laws will have incidental effects on different community members. But unless every man is to be a "law unto himself," there cannot be an exemption for everyone who complains about a law's indirect effect on his constitutional rights.

That principle is especially appropriate for antidiscrimination laws, like the Colorado law that Masterpiece Cakeshop seeks to evade. Such laws are by their very nature designed to ensure equal treatment for all, so that no one has to endure the stigma and shame of being turned away by a business that disapproves of who they are. If those laws were subject to exemptions for anyone who could claim his product or service was expressive, they would become not a safeguard against discrimination, but a license to discriminate. □

⁷*Associated Press v. United States*, 1945.

⁸*Hurley v. Irish-American Gay, Lesbian and Bisexual Group of Boston, Inc.*, 1995.

⁹*Boy Scouts of America v. Dale*, 2000.

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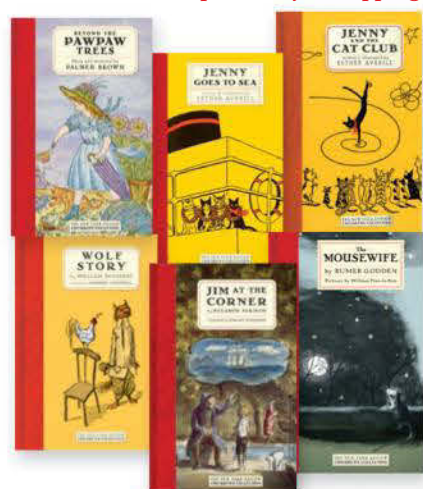


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Outing the Inside

David Salle

Louise Bourgeois:

An Unfolding Portrait

an exhibition at the Museum of Modern Art, New York City, September 24, 2017–January 28, 2018. Catalog of the exhibition by Deborah Wye. MoMA, 248 pp., \$55.00

Intimate Geometries:

The Art and Life of Louise Bourgeois

by Robert Storr. Monacelli, 828 pp., \$150.00

After we're done shaking our heads at what they had to endure, we project onto our long-lived women artists a mystique that's as old as history—that of the sorceress or the good witch. These women have a secret. We want them to tell us everything, *but maybe they don't want to*. If we can gain access to their magical workshop, squeezing through a narrow corridor to find the door, we might be privy to some important mysteries. The veils will be unwound, and finally we will look life in the face and weep for all that was lost to get us here.

In her long life, Louise Bourgeois experienced both extremes of the female artist story—marginalization, even invisibility early on, and decades later a fierce and passionate following by younger artists and curators. Her status was based on an independence from fashion, and on calling attention to emotions that most people prefer to keep hidden: shame, disgust, fear of abandonment, jealousy, anger. Occasionally, joy or wonder would surface, like a break in the clouds. But Bourgeois was an artist, not a therapist. Her imagination was tied to forms, and how to make them expressive. Her gift was to represent inchoate and hard-to-grasp feelings in ways that seem direct and unfiltered.

Deborah Wye, the Museum of Modern Art's chief curator emerita of prints and illustrated books, has put together an elegant and revealing exhibition of Bourgeois's graphic work, prints, and printed books—some 265 images, made with a wide variety of techniques, all from the museum's extensive holdings, along with related drawings, early paintings, and a small selection of sculptures that show their reciprocity with the drawn forms. Wye, who organized the first Bourgeois retrospective at MoMA in 1982, as well as a survey of Bourgeois's drawings in 1994, has devoted much of her professional life to the artist and knew her well, and this show must be something of a victory lap for her.

On first impression, the books and other works on paper seen against the museum's dove-gray or Venetian red walls are absorbing; they pull you in. But to call it a print show would be a little misleading. Bourgeois was forever altering her work, making additions and adjustments to printing proofs as they occurred to her in the moment, and the majority of the prints in the exhibition exist in several different states, or stages of development. They are often added to, painted, or drawn on—sometimes just a dot of color, other



Louise Bourgeois: Femme, 2006

times reimagined completely. What we are really looking at are paintings on paper, which take as their starting point a printed image as a first layer.

Over the course of her marathon career, Bourgeois worked in a wide range of mediums and formats, from engravings just five inches tall to sculptural assemblages sprawling across vast museum spaces. For a long period in the 1950s, she was depressed and creatively blocked, and began long-term psychoanalysis, which seems to have helped. She emerged from her slump as a protean workaholic from whose hand issued warehouses full of materially and emotionally diverse stuff. Even within this focused exhibition we can see the range of Bourgeois's sensibility, from intimate visual diarist to stage designer manqué, intent on dominating the museum experience with her theatrical *mise-en-scènes*.

There's a disarming prelude as you enter the show: a wall of thirty-six smallish images, collectively titled *The Fragile* (2007), that highlights the playful side of Bourgeois's graphic art. Most are economical line drawings, one image to a sheet, some augmented with washes of color. There are two motifs: spiders and their webs, and women with greatly enlarged, pendu-

lous breasts. The spiders have human faces, and the heads of the women, all tiny in proportion to their bodies, have a grinning countenance such as a child might draw. One drawing shows the rudimentary profile of a woman's face, with a high-bridged nose and thin lips, whom we recognize as the artist herself. This head has no eyes, perhaps because they're no longer needed.

These drawings are like sophisticated cartoons minus the captions; you can imagine some of them printed on cocktail napkins; others would make striking tattoos. In addition to visual humor, the suite shows off Bourgeois's easy mastery of contour drawing, shape, and placement. She understood the power of white space, how images and marks could be moved around the page for effect, and how sometimes making an image smaller gives it a louder voice. Interestingly, almost all of her images are drawn from a full frontal view, head-on, like specimens pressed onto glass. There are few three-quarter views of anything, perhaps because that would imply a world too local, too real, instead of the symbolic range that is her realm.

Once inside the main galleries, the exhibition begins with several illus-

trated books and single prints from 1946 to 1949, all of which still look fresh today. Bourgeois was from the start a high-level illustrator and book designer, and the overall tone of these engravings, which feature motifs of buildings—towers or chimneys for the most part—combined with women's bodies or parts of bodies, is one of earnest modernism; she is already adept at placing her symbolic images in an emotionally suggestive pictorial space. A 1984 variation on her famous *Femme Maison* series (which originated in 1946) features a nude woman from the waist down, the top half replaced by a multistory building with archways and high windows, with the hand of one thin arm wanly waving to the upper-left corner. Printed on a ground of bright salmon pink, it remains a pungent and incisive logo of feminist art.

The space in these illustrations, together with their small size, gives us a child's-eye view of life—some of the forms loom above eye level, and the interior spaces are tightly framed and slightly claustrophobic; we see only corners, or rooms crowded with ladders going nowhere. Either there's no place to stand or one is outside, in a too-open space. The mood is chilly and gray, unsettled and unsettling. In this early phase, the artist whom Bourgeois most closely resembles in terms of tone, touch, and point of view is that other intimate fantasist and chronicler of the doomed family, Edward Gorey. The difference, of course, is that Gorey draws the monster plain, while Bourgeois only implies it.

Dispersed through the first few rooms are examples of Bourgeois's early carved and painted wood sculptures, and they are all pretty much heartbreaking in the rightness of their forms and colors. *Pillar* (1949–1950), *Figure* (1954), and *Forêt (Night Garden)* (1953) are among her best early works, made some years before she turned to more elaborate and more narrative constructions made with a variety of industrial materials. Had she remained on this earlier path, Bourgeois might have been the three-dimensional equivalent of a deeply inner-directed artist like the painter Forrest Bess. That, however, would have meant renouncing a certain ambition to be heard.

If she wasn't interested in being that kind of sculptor, Bourgeois continued to elaborate a more intimist sensibility in her drawings. Panic, claustrophobia, frustration, helplessness, and ennui, as well as a strange fatalistic elation, were her subjects, and she went at them with a combination of intuition and design sense.

Bourgeois was a poet of transitions, and of things entering other things. She grasped the malleability of pictorial space—how to shape the warp and woof of it into a visual logic, and how to make that plasticity relate to our bodily and emotional experience. In one untitled watercolor from 2004, swollen tubular or podlike shapes appear to rend the horizontal plane of colored washes, to suggest forms both underwater and in the air. To this graphic sophistication, Bourgeois added an insistence on

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the specifics—physical, psychological, and social—of female experience.

This aspect of her work is all-pervasive, and manifests itself generally in biomorphism and the attention given to escutcheons and contact points, as well as certain bodily details—nipples, orifices, and other sites of exchange, points of entry and excretion, body cavities, pass-throughs—things that signify “inside-outness” generally. In all of this, Bourgeois is way out in front of the competition. Even Picasso, that cavalier rearranger and morpher of human anatomy, can only really look at the body from the outside. For Bourgeois, the inside, with all its delicacy and power, *is* the outside. She moves easily from outside to inside and back again.

Born in Paris in 1911, Bourgeois suffered more than the usual number of grievous blows to the psyche, and her inner life stayed tightly wrapped around their memory. War, illness, sexual jealousy, mental instability were all things she witnessed in her first decade, and she never forgot—or forgave—any of them. As a teenager she learned that the attractive young Englishwoman who lived with the family as a tutor was also her father’s mistress, and this betrayal in particular was something she never got over. In addition, or perhaps in response, her mother was fragile and often ill, and young Louise became her companion at various spas and treatment centers; she was released from her caretaker role by her mother’s death when she was twenty-one.

After the loss of her mother, and encouraged by her charming and tyrannical father, Bourgeois started a small business selling works on paper, prints, and illustrated books out of a corner of the family’s tapestry workshop on the Boulevard Saint-Germain. To acquire her stock, she scoured the auction houses and book dealers, and she seems to have absorbed, almost overnight, the dominant graphic styles of the day. She had a particular affinity for Bonnard and Toulouse-Lautrec, as well as other artists who used the illustrated book form, which was then in vogue. Something about these *livres d’artiste*, as they were known—the way they combined text and pictures, and the way the image was printed from engraving or etching plates, the whole satisfying feel in the hand of beautifully made paper embossed with rectangles of finely drawn tones of gray—formed the template for how Bourgeois would think about her own art, on and off, for the rest of her life.

At age twenty-six, she met and married the American art historian Robert Goldwater, and from then on made her home in New York. It was at the Art Students League that Bourgeois made her first engravings and woodblock prints on small sheets of paper. These early works are modest but graphically sophisticated. She quickly moved on

to making her own illustrated books, which combined story with image, in many ways a natural fit for the precocious beginner, who early on recognized that her own personal history was to be her creative wellspring. She also had the ability to see in a glimpse, and later recall, an image that could carry complex feelings, as in her etching *Thompson Street* (1946), which depicts a Goreyesque gloomy figure standing in a doorway; it was inspired by seeing a young prostitute in her neighborhood.

Bourgeois’s work of the late 1940s and beyond looks very much like a continuation of the Surrealist sensibility. She herself downplayed any con-

The MoMA show gives us an artist who channeled her Surrealist inclinations into a direct, improvisational way of working. Should anyone miss the more extroverted or public side of her work, the museum’s atrium is home to one of Bourgeois’s crowd-pleasing spiders. This one has legs of steel (all eight of them), the upper joints of which reach twenty-one feet off the floor. *Spider* (1997) differs from some of its cousins in that the space formed inside the arachnid legs is taken up by a cylindrical enclosure of steel mesh bolted to a thin steel frame, essentially a wire cage roughly fifteen feet tall and ten feet in diameter that one enters through a narrow opening. On the inside, perfume bottles, bits of bone, pendulous shapes of cast rubber, and sections of tapestry have been tied to the wire mesh, like fruit to a sukkah.

What is a graphic sensibility? It begins with a sensitivity to the material, the paper or canvas, and the point of impact, the place where the tool hits the surface, as something that stays continually alive. Think of Cy Twombly and Jean-Michel Basquiat, teacher and student, figuratively speaking. The hand that grips a piece of charcoal as it touches down on the paper is like a phonograph needle skipping lightly across a scratchy LP. With all the skips and floats and the intermittent sinking into the record’s grooves, music starts to fill the air.

What are the hallmarks of Bourgeois’s graphic style? She uses mostly short or medium-length lines made by pencil, engraving tool, or brush, and

the marks, all moving more or less in one direction, but not rigidly so, are bundled together in loose, overlapping rows—much like a naive artist’s rendering of hair, or like medical drawings of muscle fibers bunched together in long strings. These bundles accumulate to make forms, but have no mass to speak of. They take up space but don’t weigh much. The repetitive, directional lines call up a number of associations, from the art of the Pacific Northwest Native Americans to Outsider Art. Bourgeois is adept at outlining shapes with a thin, skipping line, a cousin to Andy Warhol’s ink-and-blotter-paper line, which is itself derived from the broken-line illustrations of Ben Shahn.

You feel that Bourgeois wants to dig down to the basic fiber of form itself en route to creating an image; it’s what drawing can do, after all. A subset of the marks that she uses, especially those made with a brush and ink, have the length and start-and-stop quality of a stitch of thread or embroidery: graphic stitches, which are bundled together and become in turn the building blocks for many of her images. These include the skein or hank of hair or yarn, as well as nerve and muscle fibers, including flayed skin and tissue, which cluster, bale up, and twist, and can become in some works undulating cur-

tains of hairlike walls, or take the form of river currents and ocean waves. The equivalency that Bourgeois draws between hair or yarn and muscle fibers or tissue is one of her principal inventions.

Hair, women’s hair, is all over Bourgeois’s art. It is the perfect graphic element; like water, it can go anywhere and take virtually any shape. It can flow like a river, pass through keyholes, or twist around another form, strangling it. It can take the form of a flying carpet, or be made to cover, or smother, another surface. Or it can be parted to reveal what’s underneath. Hair is something to hide behind, or a memento left behind. The eroticism of hair was also a Surrealist staple, and Bourgeois makes good use of it.

One drawing—*Hair* (1948)—lays out the vocabulary that would remain in place for more than sixty years. Using a brush and ink, Bourgeois draws a female figure as two vertical columns of sacks topped by a featureless oval head, the whole figure enveloped in a cascade of hair that flows down both sides of the body, from the top of the head almost down to the feet. The roughly almond shape of the streaming-out mass of hair that frames the pod shapes, all seamed down the middle and topped off with a little button head, give the image another, labial reading. It’s like going inside Courbet’s *The Origin of the World* (1866) and coming back out again as a doppelgänger in disguise. The detail contains the whole, like an image out of Nabokov—the world reflected in a soap bubble.

Another of Bourgeois’s recurrent motifs is the protuberance, with its ready associations to bodily forms—breasts, sagging buttocks, scrota, and also tree forms, fungus of all sorts, drops of water; all the swelling, drooping, bagging forms and shapes in nature, anything dangling or hanging, any organic and even inorganic form that is subject to gravity, which is to say just about everything. Sometimes the pendula gather themselves up and reverse direction, rising up from the bottom of the garden or the ocean floor.

I can’t think of anything in the canon by male artists after Leonardo that does much with the body from the inside. The way Bourgeois addressed the basic notion of the body, especially the female body, as having an inside might be her biggest legacy. One modest black-and-white print from a 1989–1990 portfolio simply titled *Anatomy* has a resonance and a poignancy far bigger than its modest size. It shows what looks like the lower section of a spinal column, with the blade-like lower ribs curving outward from the central core of bone. What makes the image arresting is the slightly up-angled point of view that gives access to a tiny opening within a recess at the bottom in the column’s center, and just above, two rows of three narrow “windows,” similar to those in the *Femme Maison* drawings. A directional energy leads the eye up, by implication, into and through the interior spaces of the bone, through the core of the core, so to speak, to a new realm of vulnerable body feeling. There’s an intimation of the embalmer’s art to it, the hook with a wad of cotton inserted deep into the body to stop fluids from leaking.

The feeling of “up inside and through the middle” of the body is present in



Louise Bourgeois: Self Portrait, 2007

nection to the Surrealists; she did not see herself as their legatee, possibly because she knew all the ones who had fled Europe for New York during the war. (Although there is no record of it, as a French speaker it’s possible she experienced firsthand André Breton’s flagrant misogyny, and that would have been reason enough to take some distance.) In the way that sometimes the full flowering of a movement only happens after everyone has gone home, Bourgeois seems, at this remove, the true heir to Giorgio de Chirico, Max Ernst, André Masson, and Joan Miró. It’s as though she uncorked the genie in their bottle.

Some of her drawings from the late 1940s look like they could have been made by Magritte, had he been able to get beyond his precious subject matter. The Surrealists’ professed belief in the power of the unconscious to guide the hand seems paltry compared to hers. There is as well a strong undercurrent in her work of the shamanistic and totemic forms of Native American and other tribal art, which also greatly interested the Surrealists. One way to think about Bourgeois’s art is to imagine Surrealism, that most adolescent as well as female-objectifying of art movements, retooled by a grown-up woman.

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other works such as *Torso, Self-Portrait* (1963–1964) and *Janus Fleurie* (1968), as well as some of the large etchings, *My Inner Life* (2008) and *Just Like Me* (2007). These depict the body reduced to pods and tubes coiled around a central axis. For once, “gut-wrenching” is not a figure of speech. The artist digs deep within herself, imagines her own anatomy breaking into pieces. She shows us the results of her own autopsy.

Aided by a small team of assistants and printers, Bourgeois produced in her last years two separate suites of large soft-ground etchings, both remarkable in their own way. In the first suite, the sixty-inch-tall vertical sheets allow Bourgeois to play out on a much larger scale the reciprocity between plant forms and those of the body. In one print, titled *Swelling* (2007–2008), in which three different states, one with added color, are represented, Bourgeois manages to create the impression that a stack of forms—part beanstalk, part vertebrae, part uterus or kidneys—has burst upward, clearing the concentric waves of either water or soil or primordial muck at the bottom half of the image. Inside the trunk of the rising, swollen column are smaller pod shapes, like seeds, rock babies, or jellybeans. “Swelling,” a verb seldom associated with museum art, is a wonderful title, and the kinesthetic feeling of an organism thrusting upward is palpable, and also graphically tight.

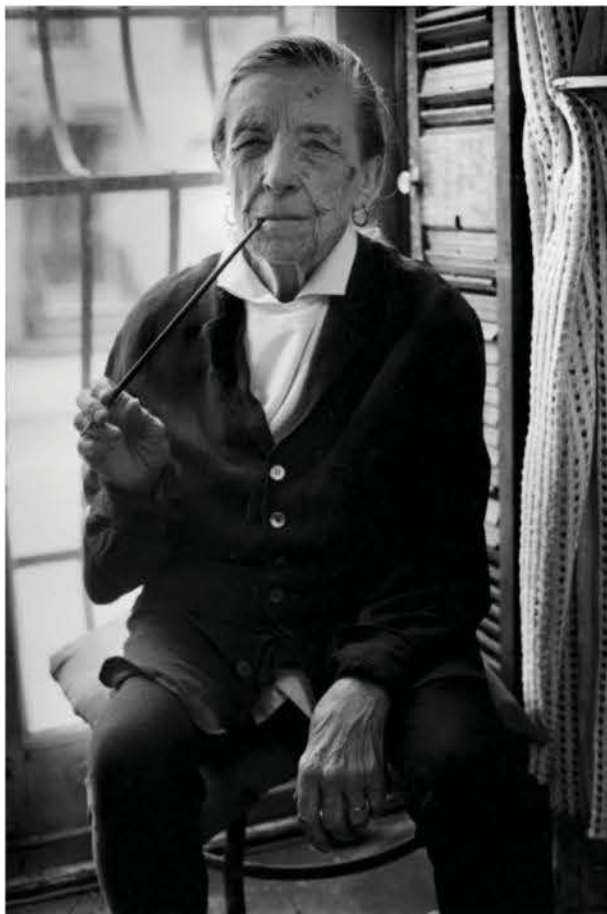
The last major prints Bourgeois completed are in a horizontal format sixty inches wide and feature a repeated motif of two loosely braided linear or tubular forms that divide the rectangle diagonally from lower left to upper right. Across fourteen separate sheets, she added additional imagery and marks in pencil, watercolor, and gouache (mostly red) that pulse and spread and course across the length of the paper. Free and loose, with great directional energy, the prints, collectively titled *à l’Infini* (2008), are possibly Bourgeois’s most ebullient works.

Other late works, like the tapestry and needlepoint-covered life-size heads from 2002, made when Bourgeois was ninety-one, achieve that sweet spot somewhere between the decorative and the disturbing, but leaning toward the latter. They resemble masks worn by Mexican wrestlers or S&M gear, but with patterns borrowed from rugs that look, at that scale, like Rorschach tests. The first time I saw a group of them in a museum vitrine, in that instant before you recognize the familiar inside the new, I let out an audible *What the fuck?*

In Robert Storr’s *Intimate Geometries: The Art and Life of Louise Bourgeois*, scholarship, biography, partisan argument, and subjective interpretation are all intertwined. The book was more than twenty years in the writing, and Storr’s involvement with Bourgeois goes back even further. He was deeply attracted to her as a visionary: as difficult as she could sometimes be, she embodied his ideal of an authentic artist.

A painter himself, as well as a former senior curator in MoMA’s Department

of Painting and Sculpture, Storr is well grounded in the physical realities of how works of art are actually made. His descriptions of Bourgeois’s drawing tropes—what they are, how they look, and what they mean—are far and away the best writing on her work that I’ve seen. The book is a major achievement, not just of scholarship, but also as a record of the intersection of two sensibilities, artist and writer, and of personhood as the lens through which all art must inevitably be viewed. It also supports my belief that it takes a very long time to really know anything about an artist, to internalize her ideas and sensibility.



Louise Bourgeois, New York City, June 1997; photograph by Dominique Nabokov

The hundreds of drawings reproduced in Storr’s book flesh out the picture of Bourgeois as a graphic genius that the MoMA show initiates. Storr quotes a line that she wrote in a 1948 diary: “My drawings are an arsenal of forms that I love.” Her choice of words is revealing. Certainly “forms” is the word that points us in the right direction; whatever else she was or has come to stand for, Bourgeois was primarily engaged in finding and inventing forms, and it’s that search, about which she was remarkably clear-eyed and objective, that makes her work so potent. The word “arsenal” is pure Bourgeois. There is no mistaking her intention to lay siege to something.

Bourgeois’s work found common cause with the art world of the 1970s, as attention began to be paid to women artists. It was a seismic shift, and it’s still going on. Although she did not identify with Feminist Art as such, Bourgeois was very active in the movement, and its triumphal tide raised the boat of her career. She was a ready-made example of an artist whose imagery and way of working were seen as specific to her gender. Female experience and identity, especially the parts centered on biological processes like sex, childbirth, and lactation, as well as so-called domestic crafts like rubbings, weaving, embroidery, and sewing: it was no longer necessary to leave them at the

door in order to be taken seriously as an artist. Many other artists have also worked with female imagery; in art it’s a matter of what you make out of it. Bourgeois’s art came to prominence more as a result of her singularity than her team spirit.

Opportunities for women denied, an institutional bias toward male artists—it is a familiar narrative. It still goes on, but one hopes less so. Henry Geldzahler, the Metropolitan Museum’s first curator of modern and contemporary art, used to tell a story on himself that illustrates the bias against women artists at midcentury. In 1969, as he was finalizing what would become an epoch-defining exhibition, “New York Painting and Sculpture 1940–1970,” Geldzahler ran into Alice Neel at a party. They were friends; Neel had painted Geldzahler’s portrait, and everyone knew she was a serious artist, albeit somewhat out of the stylistic mainstream. Neel matter-of-factly asked Geldzahler what of hers he wanted for his show. He replied, “Oh Alice, when did you turn pro?” That’s how friends were treated; imagine the condescension if you weren’t known at all.

Louise Bourgeois had to overcome many of the same prejudices. Neel was often on the dole, and made great paintings for decades before fame found her in the mid-1970s, when she had only another ten years to work. Bourgeois, eleven years younger than Neel, was married to an art historian, lived in a townhouse in the West 20s, and knew just about everyone in the art world of the 1940s and 1950s, including her early champion Alfred Barr. Fame finally found her in the early 1980s, when she was nearly seventy, with a long way yet to go. She ran out the clock at age ninety-eight, experimenting with new materials and modes of presentation almost to the end.

The MoMA exhibition gives us an opportunity to find both the young woman and the modernist inventor underneath the slyly imperious grande dame we see on the cover of Storr’s book in the famous Robert Mapplethorpe photograph from 1982. Now that we have some distance, Bourgeois’s art, left to speak for itself, is potent, formally bold, and mysterious. It is sometimes alarming, and often beautiful. Its beauty is the result of a controlled collision of forms that are finely tuned to one another; its effects seem perpetually positioned between a major and a minor key. With apologies to Samuel Beckett, her work might be called pricks and kicks in about equal measure. □

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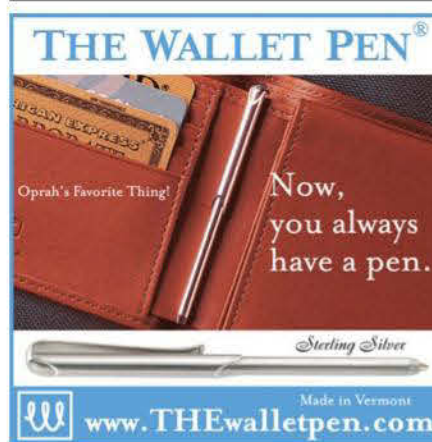
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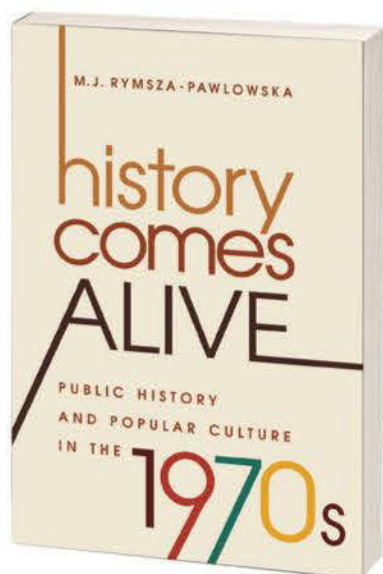
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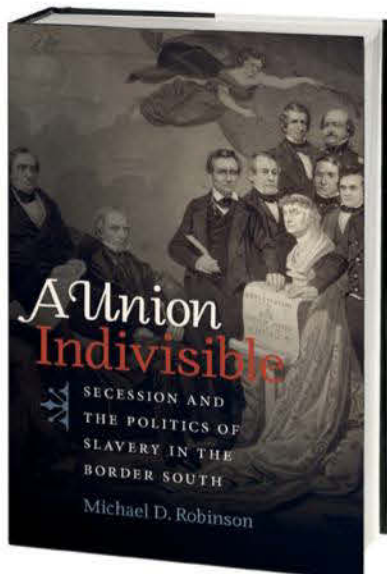
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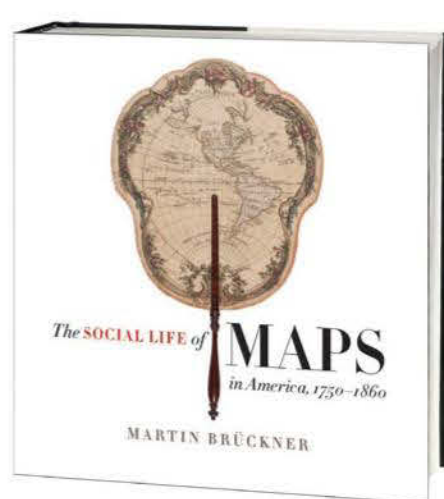
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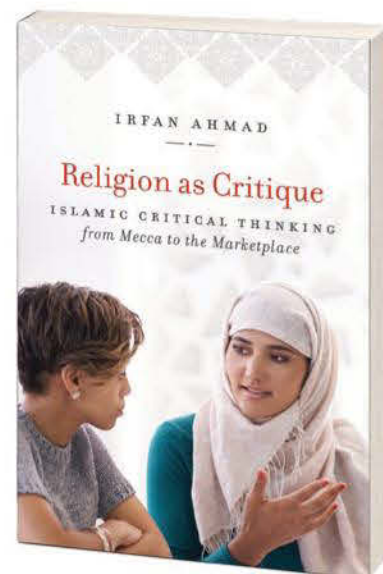


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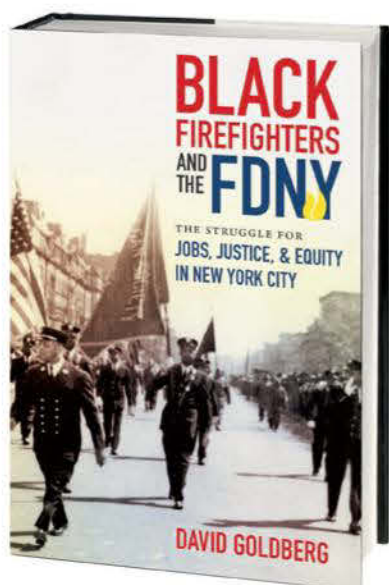
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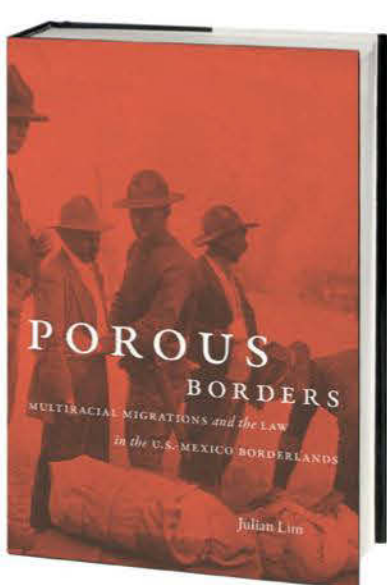
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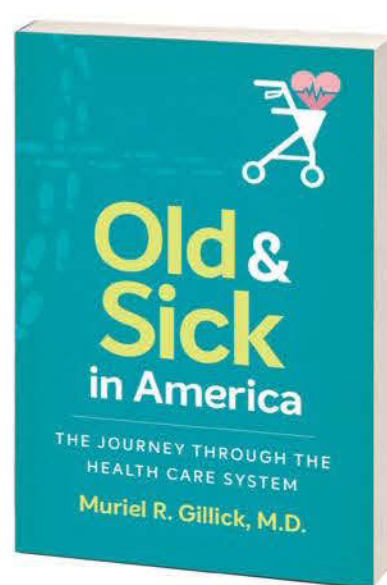
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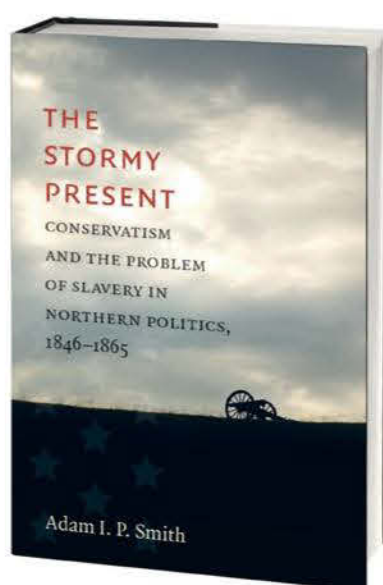
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